FOSTERING A VIBRANT CHURCH COMMUNITY THROUGH SPIRITUAL INTER-CONNECTIVITY IN SMALL GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

FOSTERING A VIBRANT CHURCH COMMUNITY
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IN SMALL GROUPS

by
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United Theological Seminary, 2026

Mentors

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This project was conducted at Ivy Creek United Methodist Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, where, despite its long history and active ministries, the congregation had experienced a decline in vibrancy. The purpose was to address this challenge by fostering deeper spiritual companionship among members and encouraging greater intimacy with God. Over six weeks, the program combined teaching, fellowship events, prayer notes, and pre- and post-project surveys. Within small group settings, participants were guided to cultivate closer relationships with one another while also nurturing their spiritual growth. The project demonstrated that intentional community practices can renew vitality within the church.

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Special thanks are due to the congregation of Ivy Creek United Methodist Church. Their openness, cooperation, and partnership made it possible for this research to go beyond theory and take root in actual ministry. Through their participation, they helped me see the Church more fully as the interconnected body of Christ where faith is not lived out in isolation, but in mutual love, support, and growth.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my family, who have supported me with unwavering love, encouragement, and patience. Their presence made it possible for me to devote time and energy to this work.

Above all, I give thanks to God, who has faithfully guided each step of my life and this journey. It is by God's grace that all of this has been made possible and by that same grace I trust in what lies ahead.

DEDICATION

To the Living God,

who walks with me each day,

whispers softly into the silence of my soul,

and fills my spirit with boundless love.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEB	Common English Bible
DMin	Doctor of Ministry
ICUMC	Ivy Creek United Methodist Church
NIV	New Interpretation Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
UMC	United Methodist Church

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

— Romans 12:4-5, New International Version

INTRODUCTION

The law of inertia, a concept I first encountered in high school physics, is both simple and profoundly insightful. An object remains at rest or continues to move at a constant speed in a straight line unless acted upon by an external force. In other words, over time, motion naturally tends to cease or fall into repetitive, unchanging patterns.

In a similar manner, many churches today appear to be subject to this law of inertia. Despite having carried out remarkable ministries and missions through the grace of God, their worship services, programs, and outreach initiatives often continue without the vitality and awe that once accompanied encounters with the gospel. While outward forms and activities persist, the inner spiritual energy gradually diminishes. Over time, this stagnation can become entrenched, making it increasingly challenging to experience the dynamism and vibrancy of authentic faith even amidst ongoing church activities.

At such points of stagnation, what is needed is a new force, an intentional and revitalizing energy capable of redirecting momentum. Small groups can serve as precisely this transformative force.

A small group is far more than a casual gathering. It represents a sacred space in which individuals encounter God personally and cultivate authentic connections with one another. In larger congregational settings, the personal stories, struggles of faith, and moments of joy and sorrow often remain hidden. Within the context of a small group,

however, these experiences find expression. Such sharing fosters mutual connectedness, which in turn generates renewed spiritual energy and deepened relational bonds.

When an individual shares the story of their faith journey, it often resonates deeply with others, creating a ripple effect of understanding and empathy. As members pray together and reflect on Scripture, the presence of God becomes tangible within the rhythms of everyday life. These experiences are often more fully realized and encouraged within the context of small groups. In this way, small groups serve as spaces where participants encounter a living connection with both God and one another, providing a powerful force for transformation that can counteract the church's spiritual inertia.

Spiritual vibrancy does not emerge from programs alone. It arises from the awakening of faith within relational contexts, through deep fellowship with God, who grants grace, transformation, and restoration, and within a spiritual community that rejoices and mourns together. Small groups act as catalysts for this vibrancy, fostering the development of meaningful connections in which members grow together. They are not merely structural components of church life; rather, they resemble interconnected living organisms, through which God can restore vitality to the church and deepen relationships with both Him and one another.

In the chapters that follow, I will examine the biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary foundations underpinning this conviction. Drawing upon these foundations, I will present the design of the project and analyze its outcomes.

Chapter One introduces the ministry context for this project: Ivy Creek United Methodist Church and its surrounding community. With a history spanning over 200 years, Ivy Creek is a church with a long-standing legacy. Although the congregation is

relatively small, the church has faithfully carried out a variety of ministries serving both its members and the local community.

Like many churches, Ivy Creek faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a decline in Sunday worship attendance. While its ministries continued even during difficult times, the pandemic nevertheless created a barrier to relational closeness, as social distancing limited opportunities for meaningful interpersonal connection.

It is my conviction that if relationships with God and with one another are nurtured more deeply, the church will not only sustain its ministries but also experience renewed vibrancy, both individually and collectively as a faith community.

Chapter Two examines Ephesians 4:11–16, a passage that addresses the interplay of diversity and unity within the church. Here, diversity can be understood as the distinct characteristics of individuals, each potentially independent and unconnected, while unity refers to the maintenance of oneness without compromising individual uniqueness. The concept of inter-connectivity highlights the relational connections among distinct individuals, showing how their interactions contribute to a cohesive whole. Therefore, the use of "inter-connectivity" in the title of this dissertation underscores the principle that brings about unity within diversity.

While diversity brings new perspectives and possibilities, it can also generate conflict and, in some cases, inhibit the dynamism of the community. The challenge, then, is to maintain diversity while fostering unity, allowing differences to contribute to the growth and vitality of both individuals and the church as a whole.

Chapter Three focuses on the Quaker tradition, with particular attention to the role of silence in Quaker worship. Silence is not merely the absence of sound or opinion; rather, it constitutes a form of active listening that can foster deeper relationships with God and with others. Through this practice, individuals learn to understand and accept one another, cultivating empathy and spiritual attentiveness. In this way, active listening becomes a powerful tool for deepening connections with both God and fellow believers.

Chapter Four examines the theological concept of the Priesthood of All Believers, which asserts that all who believe have direct access to God without the necessity of an intermediary priest. Within the context of small groups, this doctrine underscores the importance of each member's personal relationship with God. While the role of the small group leader is meaningful, it is not a prerequisite for divine connection. Every believer is capable of cultivating a deep, personal relationship with God and bringing those faith experiences into the group setting. Furthermore, this doctrine facilitates the sharing of pastoral care among all members, reflecting one of the priestly roles.

Chapter Five turns to Bowen Family Systems Theory, which examines how individuals both influence and are influenced by the family systems to which they belong. This chapter considers how family dynamics can illuminate the interactions that occur within small groups. Small groups, like families, consist of a limited number of members and share similar relational structures. The theory's emphasis on interconnectedness provides valuable insights into emotional processes, relational patterns, and personal growth within these settings.

Chapter Six integrates the foundational discussions from the preceding chapters and presents the practical implementation of this research through a small group project.

Participants were given the opportunity to learn how relationships with others and with God play a vital role in sustaining an active and vibrant faith life. Although the project was limited in scope, it enabled participants to experience tangible changes in their spiritual practices and relational dynamics.

This chapter will detail how the project was designed, the content it encompassed, and the outcomes that were observed. It serves as a key demonstration of how theological and theoretical foundations can be applied meaningfully in real ministry contexts.

Through these six chapters, this dissertation aims to illustrate how small groups can cultivate renewed vibrancy both in individuals and within the broader church. By developing and experiencing companionship with others and intimacy with God, participants encounter more than intellectual understanding. They engage in transformative relational and spiritual growth. Small groups are not merely spaces for acquiring knowledge. They are sacred settings where relationships with God and with one another are deepened, leading to authentic life transformation in Christ. The church is called not simply to maintain worship and ministry routines but to function as a living community, alive with dynamic relationships with the living God and with one another. In this context, small groups play a pivotal role in restoring and sustaining spiritual vibrancy for both individuals and the entire congregation.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

The question "What is the church?" invites a variety of answers. Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng addresses this question in his book The Church, distinguishing between the church's inseparable "historical form" and its "true nature." [1] The historical form refers to the institutional structures of the church, including hierarchy and dogma, which have evolved over time as products of historical development. In contrast, the true nature of the church reflects its essential purpose. Küng contends that the true nature of the church is to exist as a community of believers who come together to serve God and one another. This community is characterized by love, compassion, and solidarity, collectively advancing the message of the Gospel.

The Bible offers multiple images of the church that illuminate its essence. It is described as the Body of Christ, with Christ as the head and believers as the members of the body (Ephesians 1:10; 4:15). Another biblical image portrays the church as the People of God (2 Corinthians 6:16). These scriptural images emphasize the sacred relationships among believers and underscore the necessity of being connected to God. They also highlight the interconnectedness of the community of faith. In this sense, the church is not merely a building, but a people united in Christ and bound together by the love of

[1] Hans Küng, *The Church* (London, England: Burns & Oates, 1995), 28.

God. Healthy churches manifest their vitality through organic relationships with God, with one another, and with the surrounding community. Through these relational connections, the body of Christ grows, and God's people collectively advance the mission of His kingdom.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, it brought profound changes to the life of the church. Congregations were forced to close their doors and adopt new methods for conducting worship services and maintaining connections online. This shift prompted discussions on how to approach worship, communion, and pastoral visits in a virtual context. While the pandemic accelerated structural changes, a more serious challenge was its impact on the church's essence, its love, compassion, and solidarity. Quarantine and social isolation separated believers from their faith communities, weakening the sense of togetherness in Christ. Consequently, many churches experienced a decline in energy, enthusiasm, and communal vitality.

Even prior to the pandemic, many congregations had been gradually experiencing a loss of vitality. Declining membership and reduced influence within local communities reflected weakening connections and relational bonds. Although ministries continued in challenging circumstances and members still gathered for worship, the erosion of relational depth remained a significant factor undermining both individual faith and the overall vitality of the church.

This chapter will examine how the history of Ivy Creek UMC, the demographics of its surrounding community, and my own spiritual journey intersect. The interplay of these factors suggests that small groups offer a promising pathway toward church

revitalization, fostering renewed relationships with God and one another while restoring communal energy and vibrancy.

Ministry Context

History of Ivy Creek United Methodist Church

Ivy Creek UMC has a rich history that dates back to the colonial era in Virginia. During this period, the Protestant Episcopal Church was the established church of the colony, enjoying official support and often serving as the only denomination authorized by the authorities. Public funds were allocated to support the church and its clergy, including the construction and maintenance of church buildings.[2] However, in 1779, the Church of England was officially disestablished by the General Assembly of Virginia, bringing all state support to an end. Shortly thereafter, the Methodist Episcopal Church was formally organized at a conference held in Baltimore in 1784.[3]

Early Methodist gatherings in Albemarle County, Virginia, were held at Maupin's Meeting House, a location popular for camp meetings. The church is first mentioned in 1788, when James Harris conveyed seventy-five acres on the north side of Moorman's River to Thomas Jarman, including two acres where the Methodist Episcopal Church was situated. This congregation served as a forerunner to today's Mount Moriah United

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[2] Sett Lewis, *A History of the Ivy Creek United Methodist Church* (Ivy Creek UMC, 1982), 1.

[3] Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 768.

Methodist Church in White Hall, although the lot on which the current church stands was not formally deeded until 1834.[4]

Two additional early Methodist churches in the area were Keys Meeting House and Austin's Meeting House. While Keys Meeting House no longer exists, Austin's Meeting House evolved into Bingham's United Methodist Church. Mount Moriah UMC and Bingham's UMC developed their faith communities around the same time that Ivy Creek UMC was established, collectively contributing to the growth of Methodism in the region.[5]

In 1808, Bland Ballard donated a quarter acre of land, including an already-built meeting house, to the Methodist Episcopal Church through a formal deed. Ballard, deeply committed to the church, had constructed the meeting house according to his personal vision. The deed stipulated that the "sole right and title" to the land and meeting house would "forever remain with the Methodist Episcopal Church."[6] The first Ivy Creek Church was a log structure featuring a shed and stone fireplace, located near Albemarle High School at the end of Lamb's Road in Charlottesville, Virginia. The church grew alongside other denominational congregations in the district, and the earliest known Methodist minister serving the circuit that included Ivy Creek was licensed in 1793 to perform marriages.

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[4] Edgar Woods, *Albemarle County in Virginia: Giving Some Account of What It Was by Nature, of What It Was Made by Man, and of Some of the Men Who Made It* (Greenville, SC: South Historical Press, 2023), 134.

[5] Woods, *Albemarle County in Virginia*, 135.

[6] Lewis, *A History of the Ivy Creek United Methodist Church*, 3.

Historical accounts note that the Methodists in this region were particularly active and, in many cases, aligned with abolitionist sentiments. They were also reportedly as puritanical in spirit and outlook as the Baptists, who were their primary rivals during the religious revival that swept the Piedmont region in the early 19th century.[7]

As the congregation expanded over the years, Ivy Creek Church required a larger facility. In July 1873, a group of individuals presented approximately one acre of land to the church trustees for the construction of a new building. The trustees at that time included Richard W. Wingfield, Edward C. Wingfield, J. Richard Wingfield, W. R. Via, and William Roads. The deed for the second Ivy Creek Church, however, was not officially certified and recorded until March 1875.[8] The new building, located near the Rivanna River on what is now Hydraulic Road, was completed that year and served the congregation for forty-five years until the construction of the third church building.

The current Ivy Creek UMC building was constructed in 1920. The land on which it stands was originally owned by Mrs. Lucy S. Morris and later transferred to her two sons. Although a church and cemetery already existed on the property, it was agreed that this portion of the land would remain dedicated to church and burial purposes.[9] The church, constructed from native stone and featuring beautiful stained-glass windows, is often referred to as the "Rock Church" because of its distinctive design.

As the congregation grew, additional space was required for activities and classrooms. In the 1950s, a cinder block building was added adjacent to the sanctuary.

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[7] John Hammond Moore, *Albemarle: Jefferson's County, 1727-1976* (Albemarle County Historical Society, 1986), 114.

[8] Lewis, *A History of the Ivy Creek United Methodist Church*, 3.

[9] Lewis, *A History of the Ivy Creek United Methodist Church*, 4.

During the 1960s, the church acquired additional land and constructed a parsonage and a new social hall. The sanctuary itself was remodeled in 1975 under the leadership of T. Edward Helms, accommodating approximately 100 people. In 2012, the church council initiated the construction of a new fellowship hall and classrooms, completed in 2014. This facility connected the sanctuary with the old fellowship hall to enhance opportunities for ministry and mission. The new fellowship hall was designed not only as a space for congregation fellowship but also to serve as a homeless shelter, providing winter shelter prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, Ivy Creek UMC combines historical and modern facilities, supporting a wide range of activities and ministries while maintaining strong traditional ties to the local community. Its architectural and functional evolution reflects both the congregation's growth and its ongoing commitment to service and outreach.

Missions and Ministries

Missions and outreach have long been central to the life of Ivy Creek UMC. The church strives to involve every member in some aspect of its mission and outreach efforts. Among these, the Christian Arts Academy summer program has been particularly successful, providing meaningful engagement for the community's youth. In addition, Ivy Creek UMC supports a variety of local initiatives, including PACEM[10], IMPACT[11],

[10] PACEM is a ministry that supports housing for the homeless during the fall and winter. Churches in Charlottesville provide the facilities and hosts.

[11] IMPACT is an organization for ecumenical efforts to address injustices in the Charlottesville area.

and Love, INC[12], reflecting its ongoing commitment to serve both its members and the broader community.

The church has significant potential to deepen its community connections through expanded mission efforts. For example, the Christian Arts Academy could be broadened to include additional activities for youth, and new community-based initiatives could be explored, such as increased involvement in local schools or hosting outreach ministries at the church. These efforts would build upon the congregation's love for the surrounding area and create further opportunities for meaningful engagement.

A key strength of Ivy Creek UMC lies in its laity leadership, characterized by genuine devotion to the Lord and a selfless, enthusiastic willingness to serve as the hands and feet of Christ for the good of both church and community. However, the congregation faces the challenges of an aging membership, having lost many long-standing members to death, illness, relocation to be nearer family, or transitions to assisted living communities. Despite these losses, the congregation has actively responded to leadership gaps, with new leaders bringing skills, energy, and dedication to roles as speakers, teachers, mentors, and caregivers. These leaders have embraced responsibilities across ministries, including children and youth programs, congregational care, building and grounds maintenance, and broader community service.

Our congregation seeks to embody the practices of prayer, presence, gifts, service, and witness in daily church life. Prayer is shared through multiple channels, including email, the worship bulletin, and the church newsletter. Members join together in prayer

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[12] Love in the Name of Christ (Love, INC) is an organization based on Christian faith. We offer monetary support for those who seek help with clothing, housing, transportation, and food.

during Sunday services, committee meetings, special events, Sunday School classes, and smaller group gatherings, such as the Book Club. The discipline of presence is similarly emphasized, whether attending worship in person, participating in live-streamed services, or engaging in classes and meetings through online platforms.

The congregation demonstrates stewardship of God's gifts by returning a portion of those gifts through regular offerings, whether collected during Sunday services, sent by mail, or contributed online. Additional special collections are organized throughout the year to address specific church and community needs.

Service is a vital expression of faith at Ivy Creek UMC, with members actively participating in a variety of missions and ministries. These include Angel Tree, Cedars Healthcare Center, Christian Arts Academy, CROP Walk, food drives, IMPACT, Ivy Creek School, Kits for Conference, PACEM, Rise Against Hunger, Sarah's Circle, and the Wesley Foundation, among others. Witness is expressed through personal testimony shared in Sunday School, mentoring and teaching children and youth, and speaking truthfully and lovingly with friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues about the transformative impact of faith.

Despite these ongoing commitments, the congregation has experienced notable challenges in recent years. Attendance declined sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing the number of volunteers available to sustain programs and ministries. As a small church, Ivy Creek UMC has faced significant losses and now seeks to find a balance between maintaining active ministry and avoiding overextension.

Table 1. Average Attendance at All Weekly Worship Services[13]

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
In-person	99	87	79	36	45	59	61
Online			75	27	21	18	21

Although worship attendance has recently shown signs of recovery, church leaders continue to ask important questions regarding the future of Ivy Creek UMC. “Is it time to intentionally partner with an organization or resource that can help us restore and strengthen the vitality we have once experienced? Is it time to put on our own oxygen mask so that we may be better equipped to serve others?” [14] These questions reflect a recognition that sustaining spiritual energy and effective ministry requires both introspection and strategic support.

Community Context of Ivy Creek UMC

Ivy Creek UMC is located in Albemarle County, Virginia, a region known for its natural beauty and diverse population. The county is home to a vibrant community encompassing a wide range of demographics, including variations in population size, language, religion, and cultural background.

[13] Ivy Creek United Methodist Church Annual Statistics 2025

[14] Ivy Creek United Methodist Church Profile 2023

Population

According to the most recent data from the United States Census Bureau,[15] Albemarle County has a total population of approximately 109,000 people, reflecting a steady growth rate of 10.6% between 2010 and 2020. Within a 3.5-mile radius of the church, roughly 20,000 people reside. The county is characterized by a racially and ethnically diverse population. Countywide, the population is approximately 77.8% White, 9.1% African American, and the remaining 13% comprises Hispanic, Asian, and other racial or ethnic groups.[16] Within the church's immediate radius, the demographics show slightly greater diversity: 67.1% White, 15.2% African American, 9.0% Hispanic, 5.4% Asian, and 3.4% from other racial or ethnic groups.[17] This suggests that the church's local community is somewhat more diverse than the broader county population.

Language

While English is the primary language spoken in Albemarle County, the region's diverse population contributes to the use of multiple other languages. According to the American Community Survey, Spanish is the most commonly spoken language after English, with 4.6% of residents using it at home.[18] Additional languages spoken in the

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[15] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Quick Facts Albemarle County, Virginia*, Accessed April 9, 2021, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/albemarlecountyvirginia/.

[16] MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia* (April 3, 2023), 20.

[17] MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: 3.5 mi Around 674 Woodlands Road, Charlottesville, Virginia 22901, United States* (April 3, 2023), 20.

[18] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Quick Facts Albemarle County, Virginia*.

area include French, German, Chinese, and Korean, reflecting the multicultural composition of the community.

Education

Albemarle County is also known for its strong educational institutions. The county boasts a high school graduation rate of 93.5%, slightly above the national average.[19] Higher education opportunities are abundant, including the University of Virginia and Piedmont Virginia Community College. Among adults aged 18 and older, 60.4% have earned a bachelor's or graduate degree, indicating a highly educated population overall.[20]

Income

Economic indicators highlight both prosperity and disparity within the county. The median household income is $88,628, significantly higher than the national median of $68,703. The overall poverty rate is relatively low at 3.44%.[21] However, there exists a notable income gap among different demographic groups, contributing to a higher cost of living in certain areas and highlighting the economic diversity within the county.

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[19] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Quick Facts Albemarle County, Virginia*.

[20] MissionInsite, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia*, 6.

[21] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Quick Facts Albemarle County, Virginia*.

Employment

Albemarle County's economy is both strong and diverse, encompassing a range of industries and employment opportunities. The largest employers include the University of Virginia, Albemarle County Public Schools, and Martha Jefferson Hospital. Other significant sectors include healthcare, retail, and manufacturing. The workforce is predominantly white-collar, with 75.9% of workers employed in professional, managerial, or administrative roles, compared to 24.1% in blue-collar occupations, reflecting the county's professional and service-oriented economic base.[22]

Housing

The housing market in Albemarle County is competitive, with limited availability for both sale and rental properties. Over the past decade, the total number of housing units increased from 44,748 to 52,015, yet the vacancy rate declined slightly by 0.94%,[23] indicating strong demand. The median home value is $386,400, significantly above the national median of $295,300, and rental prices are correspondingly higher.[24] These factors contribute to a higher cost of living in the county, particularly in areas close to major employers and educational institutions.

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[22] MissionInsite, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia*, 30.

[23] MissionInsite, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia*, 26.

[24] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Quick Facts Albemarle County, Virginia*.

Religion

Religion plays a significant role in the community of Albemarle County, with a variety of religious affiliations represented throughout the area. According to data from the Association of Religion Data Archives, Christianity is the largest religious group, comprising 55.6% of the population. Those identifying as unaffiliated with any religion account for 30.7%, while other religious traditions, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, are also present, reflecting the county's religious diversity.[25]

Research into local patterns of non-participation reveals several key reasons why some individuals do not engage with religious congregations. The top concerns include perceptions that religious people are overly judgmental, that religion is too focused on money, distrust of religious leaders, distrust of organized religion, and general disillusionment with religion.[26] These findings highlight both the opportunities and challenges for faith communities seeking to engage meaningfully with a diverse and sometimes skeptical population.

Historically, Charlottesville and its surrounding counties, including Albemarle County, have been promoted as ideal retirement destinations. While the region does attract active retirees drawn to its scenic mountains and cultural amenities, this characterization does not fully capture the area's dynamic character. Charlottesville and Albemarle remain vibrant, youthful, and politically engaged communities. This vibrancy is expected to continue over the next decade, particularly in light of population growth

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[25] Religious Landscape Study, *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, Accessed April 7, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/.

[26] MissionInsite, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia*, 3.

projections reported by the Weldon Center, indicating that the area will maintain its unique blend of retirees, young professionals, and active civic participation.

Table 2. Data from the Weldon Cooper Center Chart[27]

	2016	2025 estimate	2035	2045
Albemarle County	105,715	118,828	134,104	148,337
City of Charlottesville	49,071	53,701	55,032	55,969

Albemarle County, located in central Virginia, is a region of natural beauty and growing population. The county exhibits considerable diversity in education, economy, and religious affiliation. While the cost of living is relatively high, many residents earn correspondingly higher incomes. Understanding these demographics is crucial for considering how Ivy Creek UMC can build meaningful connections and relationships within the local community. Over its long history, the church has cultivated a network of engagement with the surrounding area, reflecting a commitment to both service and relational ministry. Additionally, because many church members reside locally, the question of how congregants can develop deeper spiritual relationships aligns closely with the broader community context, emphasizing the interconnectedness of faith formation and neighborhood engagement.

Up to this point, I have explored the history and ministries of Ivy Creek UMC, along with the surrounding community in which it is situated. I now turn to reflect on my own journey of faith, considering the ways in which God's grace has been experienced

[27] Sean Tubbs, *UVA Center Projects Larger Populations for Albemarle, Charlottesville*, Accessed April 6, 2023, https://www.cvilletomorrow.org/uva-center-projects-cville-albemarle-populations/.

and revealed throughout my life. By bringing these two narratives together, the story of Ivy Creek and the story of my spiritual journey, I seek to discern how God is leading both the church and my ministry toward the fruit that God desires to bear in and through us.

My Spiritual Journey

Intimacy with God

From an early age, my mother placed great importance on the spiritual formation of her children. Each morning before school, she prayed for my younger sister and me, and she sometimes brought us to church prayer meetings. I also remember her praying in her room at night. Growing up, observing my mother's devotion to prayer profoundly shaped my own spiritual habits. Through her example, I received early training in prayer, which became a foundational aspect of my faith. Prayer was not merely a religious discipline for me. It became a time to experience a close, personal relationship with God. This practice deepened my understanding of the importance of cultivating intimacy with God.

In my early twenties, I participated in the Discipleship Training School (DTS) offered by Youth With A Mission, an interdenominational Christian training organization. The six-month program combined classroom instruction, small group activities, personal reflection, practical service, and communal living.

One of the most transformative experiences during DTS was learning about listening prayer. Prior to this, my personal prayers were primarily focused on expressing my love for God. Prayer had largely been a monologue in which I spoke, assuming God

listened. The concept of listening to God introduced a new dimension to my prayer life. Although I did not hear God's voice audibly, I learned to approach prayer as a dialogue, an interactive, relational exchange with God. This practical learning significantly deepened my intimacy with God and expanded my understanding of prayer as a relational, two-way communication.

Building on my own experiences of intimacy with God, I have sought to create opportunities for members of the congregation to deepen their relationship with Him. To facilitate this, I have organized prayer meetings and Bible studies designed to help participants engage in meaningful, personal encounters with God. These settings encourage individuals to spend focused, reflective time in God's presence and to develop a more profound understanding of God within the context of a relational and interactive faith experience.

Sanctification

I was born and raised in a Methodist family, yet my understanding of Methodism remained limited until my seminary studies introduced me to the doctrine of sanctification. While my parents' spiritual disciplines, including attending worship, reading the Bible, praying, and fasting, had instilled in me a commitment to personal holiness, the concept of social holiness within sanctification was initially unfamiliar. I had not considered the connection between personal faith and the social responsibilities of Christians.

God gradually expanded my understanding of faith from the personal to the social dimension. During my ordination process, I had the opportunity to serve in a food bank

ministry led by a historic Methodist church in Korea, a congregation founded by George E. Ogle, a United Methodist clergy member who advocated for the rights of female laborers in the Dongil textile factory in Incheon. Although I had lived in the area for four years, my involvement in the ministry revealed the extent of need in the community.

My responsibilities in the food bank were straightforward: collecting donations from schools and companies, preparing food packages, and delivering them to approximately twenty families each weekday over the course of two years. The pastor overseeing the ministry encouraged me to pursue formal training in social work, which I subsequently completed.

Initially, I viewed my service as merely part of the ordination process and a practical application for my social work studies. Over time, however, I came to recognize that the Lord's command to "feed my sheep" encompasses both spiritual and physical needs. For me, pastoral leadership involves not only conveying God's Word and guiding the faith community spiritually but also caring for the broader community.

Faith, for me, is fundamentally relational. Sanctification occurs as I grow and are transformed through my relationship with God. At the same time, my faith is expressed and matured through my relationships within the wider society, fulfilling God's purposes in the world. Thus, both my relationship with God and with others constitute essential foundations for the growth of my spiritual life.

Small Groups

From a young age, I was introduced to the concept of small group gatherings. My mother would take me to an evening meeting of five to seven people at someone's home,

where we sang hymns, read the Bible, shared devotions, gave offerings, prayed together, and spent time in fellowship. At the time, I did not know that this gathering was called a Class Meeting, a small group discipleship system designed by John Wesley. But I later recognized it as part of the Wesleyan tradition, which my church faithfully maintained.

My understanding of small groups deepened during college when I attended a small church in Seoul, South Korea. A college-age small group helped me acclimate to the new environment and provided a space where I could hear the testimonies of others and share my own experiences with God. Without this support, consistent church attendance and faith growth would have been more challenging.

These experiences have shaped my appreciation for the vital role of small groups in ministry. In South Korea, a colleague emphasized that a healthy church requires two "wings": corporate worship and active small groups. Applying this principle to youth ministry, I led small group Bible studies and developed small groups for all youth members. These groups allowed teenagers to share their faith journeys and concerns in depth. New members, in particular, found it easier to integrate into the church community through these intimate settings than through large worship gatherings.

After moving to the United States, I served at two Korean United Methodist Churches, both of which had structured small group ministries called Cell Church. As a leader, I helped facilitate gatherings where participants shared meals and reflected on questions provided by the church to guide discussion about their faith journeys. I observed that some attendees preferred small group meetings over formal worship services, finding the smaller, relational setting more approachable and supportive.

Through these experiences, I have come to understand that small groups are powerful tools for fostering relational connections. Importantly, these relationships are not limited to members within the group. They also deepen each participant's relationship with God through shared spiritual engagement and mutual encouragement.

Developing the Synergy

Kay Kotan emphasizes that, especially after the pandemic, it is essential for the church to cultivate a strong spiritual foundation in order to thrive.[28] However, a strong spiritual foundation is not only crucial in the post-pandemic context. It represents the church's true nature, necessary for maintaining vitality at all times. The period of pandemic-related restrictions revealed how easily this foundation can be weakened, as relational connections within congregations diminished. Many believers found it challenging to gather for corporate worship, meetings, and ministry activities, resulting in weakened relationships within the faith community. At the same time, spiritual practices that foster a deeper connection with God became difficult to sustain, further undermining the church's overall spiritual foundation.

Kotan proposes that becoming a "praying church" is one key strategy for restoring a strong spiritual foundation. Yet, the significance lies not merely in the act of prayer itself, but in the relational dimension that prayer fosters. Through prayer, individuals experience a renewed connection with God, and as members pray together, their spiritual bonds deepen. I have personally witnessed this dynamic in my own prayer life. While

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[28] Kay Kotan, *Being the Church in a Post-Pandemic World: Game Changers for the Post-Pandemic Church* (Knoxville, TN: Market Square Publishing, 2021), 69-70.

individual prayer played a critical role, the most profound impact came from communal prayer, where relationships within the group were strengthened, and mutual spiritual support was experienced.

For me, being a praying church does not simply mean being a congregation that prays. It signifies a church in which prayer cultivates deepened relationships with God and nurtures authentic connections among its members. In this way, prayer becomes both the foundation and the conduit through which relational and spiritual vitality are restored.

Kay Kotan emphasizes the importance of building strong relationships as a cornerstone for a vibrant church. This principle extends beyond mere friendliness among members. It calls the church to cultivate genuine connections with the broader local community.[29] Ivy Creek UMC exemplifies this approach, having continued to serve and engage with its community even under the challenging circumstances of the pandemic. The church's commitment goes beyond simply assisting those in need, demonstrating an intentional effort to maintain ongoing connections with the people in the surrounding area. In doing so, Ivy Creek UMC resists the tendency for Christian life to become insular, confined within the walls of the church, and instead pursues the relationships with the wider world that God desires.

MissionInsite supports this relational approach, recommending ministry initiatives such as "warm and friendly encounters" and opportunities for personal relationship development.[30] These suggestions align closely with Kotan's emphasis on prioritizing relational depth as a foundation for church vitality.

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[29] Kotan, *Being the Church*, 43-44.

[30] MissionInsite, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia*, 5.

However, the importance of building strong relationships is not limited to the church's external engagement. It is equally essential among members within the congregation. Developing these internal connections does not always occur naturally. It requires a holistic strategy that combines spiritual disciplines, intentional welcome practices, and opportunities for members to share deeply about their lives and faith journeys. Based on my experience, small groups provide an especially effective context for nurturing these relational connections, as they enable individuals to engage meaningfully with both God and one another.

A study investigating the factors that contribute to congregational vitality identified the presence and number of small groups as a significant driver.[31] Kevin Watson, in his research on small groups, categorizes them into different types, including affinity groups, information-driven groups, and transformation-driven groups. Of these, transformation-driven groups are particularly focused on fostering personal transformation through the grace of God, rather than merely acquiring new knowledge about God.[32] According to Watson, small groups that focus solely on knowledge acquisition are insufficient to catalyze true life change.

Within transformation-driven groups, members share spiritual challenges and victories, encourage one another, engage in prayer, and participate in spiritual disciplines together. These activities foster deep relational connections and enhance each individual's relationship with God, ultimately producing meaningful life transformation. This emphasis on personal transformation is not new in the Wesleyan tradition, Class

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[31] Kevin M. Watson, *What Is a Small Group?*, Accessed April 5, 2023, https://kevinmwatson.com/2011/04/19/what-is-a-small-group/.

[32] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 5-7.

Meetings served a similar purpose. By cultivating prayer, love, compassion, and solidarity, these small groups historically revitalized churches that had lost their vibrancy, generating both individual spiritual growth and communal dynamism.

The strengths of small groups lie in their ability to provide a more comfortable environment than larger worship services, allowing members to connect deeply with one another and with God. By facilitating close, intentional relationships, small groups offer a powerful mechanism for cultivating spiritual growth and fostering authentic connections within the church community.

Conclusion

Throughout its long history, Ivy Creek UMC has experienced many changes in its historical form, yet it has consistently sought to preserve its true nature. A key aspect of this true nature has been the church's commitment to serving the local community and fostering relationships through ministry, even in the midst of challenging circumstances. However, as the church has faced significant challenges such as declining attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid changes in the surrounding community, some of its previous vitality and dynamism have diminished.

While it is essential for the church to continually consider and adapt its historical form, it is even more fundamental to focus on its true nature—the relationships with God and with one another. When this true nature is strengthened, the church's vitality and dynamism naturally emerge. In this context, small groups can serve as a critical instrument within Ivy Creek UMC.

The small groups envisioned in this project are not merely gatherings of a few people; rather, they are intentionally structured to foster active interconnection, enabling members to share the deeper aspects of their lives and build meaningful relationships. Within these groups, spiritual relationships extend beyond casual fellowship to create a space where individuals grow together in intimacy with God. Transformation-driven small groups facilitate the deepening of both interpersonal and divine relationships, helping to strengthen the church's true nature and supporting Ivy Creek UMC in becoming a more vibrant and dynamic community. Though composed of a relatively small number of participants, the impact these groups generate, both individually and corporately, is profound.

In the chapters that follow, this study will examine the biblical, historical, and theological foundations necessary for establishing such small groups. The final chapter will then explore the outcomes and potential changes observed during a six-week project, highlighting how these small groups can foster lasting transformation within the church.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

> **Ephesians 4:11-16** (New International Version)
> 11 He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. 12 His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ 13 until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. 14 As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. 15 Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ, 16 who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored both the context of Ivy Creek UMC and the transformative movements of God's grace within my own spiritual journey. Bringing these two narratives together, I sought to discern how the true nature of the church, relationships with God and with one another, might be cultivated through small groups. Building on that foundation, this chapter will turn to the biblical grounding for such an understanding. Specifically, I will examine how Ephesians 4:11–16 provides biblical foundations that support small groups as a vital means of shaping relationships with God and with one another, and of fostering maturity in the life of faith.

The Epistle to the Ephesians can be divided into two distinct yet interconnected sections. Chapters 1–3 contain profound theological and doctrinal teachings, culminating in a resounding "amen" before seamlessly transitioning into chapters 4–6. In this latter section, believers are exhorted to live in a manner consistent with the faith they have received.[1]

Ephesians is remarkable for its timeless relevance. Unlike letters written to address specific issues within a single congregation, Ephesians was composed as a circular letter, addressing multiple Christian communities more generally.[2] This universal approach makes the epistle a lasting source of wisdom, offering insights that remain applicable across diverse church contexts and situations. While it addresses the specific challenges of early Christian communities, it also articulates principles that continue to guide the life of the Church today.

As early Christianity spread throughout western Asia Minor, local churches faced numerous challenges, including divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians, socio-cultural diversity within their communities, and the need to nurture spiritual growth. The writer of Ephesians provides profound guidance on sustaining church vitality amid these challenges, offering principles that are equally relevant for contemporary congregations seeking cohesion, unity, and spiritual maturity.

It is important to recognize that the recipients of this letter were early participants in the Christian movement, at a time when well-defined doctrines and organized

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[1] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary. volume 42: Ephesians* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 36-38.

[2] Paul J. Sampley et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 11* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 352-353.

structures were still developing. The Epistle to the Ephesians served as a guiding light, helping them navigate the complexities of faith and communal life while establishing their fledgling faith community.

Many of the challenges faced by the early church, such as divisions among members, immature Christian living, and diverse cultural backgrounds, remain relevant in contemporary faith communities. The need for unity, mutual support, and spiritual growth continues to be pressing. Studying Ephesians 4:11–16 is therefore not merely an exercise in historical analysis. It involves examining timeless principles that can guide churches in maintaining or restoring vitality amid similar challenges.

Unity within a faith community is essential for fostering mature faith. Such unity and maturity are not measured merely by numerical growth or institutional success; rather, they focus on the transformation of individual lives as the congregation matures together in faith and understanding. A vibrant and healthy church, characterized by both unity and maturity, is better equipped to fulfill its divine calling as a beacon in the world.

This chapter will show that Ephesians 4:11–16 provides invaluable insights and principles for enhancing church vitality, highlighting the significance of connection, unity, maturity, and spiritual growth within the body of Christ.

Exegesis

Diversity

The early churches that received the Epistle to the Ephesians faced diversity both within and outside their communities. According to Wayne Meeks, the first-century

church included a wide variety of people, including families, slaves, artisans, and tradespeople.[3] Early Christian communities were often organized around family-based structures. For example, the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Acts 10, provides a glimpse of what these early churches looked like. Cornelius and his household were devout and God-fearing, and his home functioned not only as a family unit but also as a church, with various types of people gathering for worship and fellowship. Typical early church gatherings were limited to around thirty to thirty-five people, constrained by the size of their homes.[4]

The diversity within these churches in Asia Minor helps explain why Ephesians emphasizes responsibilities within relationships such as those between husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters (Ephesians 5:20–6:9). These exhortations were particularly relevant for interactions within the church community rather than daily societal life.

The recipients of Ephesians included a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians. While most scholars agree that there was not a significant active Jewish Christian subgroup among them, Jewish Christian influences were present, particularly in traditions, rituals, and cultural awareness. Ephesians 2:11 mentions the "circumcision" and "uncircumcision," indicating familiarity with Jewish heritage. However, unlike other Pauline letters such as Colossians, Ephesians does not address Sabbath observance or dietary laws, suggesting that Jewish practices were not a primary concern for this

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[3] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 75-76.

[4] Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 35-36.

audience.[5] Nevertheless, tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers persisted, reflecting the challenges of maintaining unity within diverse communities.

Interpreters have highlighted the issue of Gentile conversion in the Pauline Epistles to explain the need for ethical exhortation in Ephesians. New converts often brought with them pagan beliefs, such as religious pluralism, which could conflict with the monotheistic principles of early Christianity. The cult of Artemis in Ephesus, along with worship of goddesses like Diana and Isis, exemplifies this pluralism.[6] The theological emphasis on Christ in the opening sections of Ephesians cannot be separated from this context, as Christ's unique lordship was not to be equated with the status of other deities. Consequently, the author of Ephesians likely felt a theological responsibility to persuade and ground these new believers in Christ.

During this period, false teachings were leading some believers astray. Ephesians 4:14 warns against being easily swayed by deceptive doctrines, highlighting the necessity of discernment and a firm grounding in the truth of the Gospel. To equip the church, Christ has given leaders such as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers," whose roles are to foster spiritual maturity and safeguard the community from error.

Leadership in the church encompasses both "vertical spirituality," focusing on Christ, and "horizontal ministry," involving the entire body of believers.[7] This dynamic is

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[5] Sampley et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 11*, 362.

[6] Peter W. Gosnell, "Networks and Exchanges: Ephesians 4:7-16 and the Community Function of Teachers," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 30, no. 4 (November 2000): 135–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/014610790003000404, 139.

[7] George Lotter and Timothy Van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers in Ephesians 4:1–16 and Its Relevance for the Missio Dei and a Biblical Missional Ecumenism," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 51, no. 2 (February 28, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i2.2251, 2-3.

illustrated through the metaphor of the body of Christ in Ephesians. Christ is the head, and each believer functions as a distinct part of the body. Leaders, endowed with gifts from Christ, serve to equip believers for ministry and to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12). Their authority is not for domination but for service, reflecting Christ's example of caring for the body.

The churches in Asia Minor faced diversity both internally and externally. Within the congregations, members came from various social classes and backgrounds. Outside the church, pagan cultures and competing teachings surrounded them. New converts could inadvertently introduce pagan or heretical influences, and false teachers often exploited this, threatening the community's Christian identity. In response, the author emphasizes unity in the church as a transformative resource. By fostering connection, spiritual growth, and collective discernment, diversity is not merely a challenge to manage but an opportunity for the church to mature in faith and understanding.

Unity in Christ

When we consider the early church communities' situation in relation to diversity, it is not surprising that unity emerges as a central theme in Ephesians 4:11-16. The term "unity" (ἑνότης) is unique to Ephesians in the New Testament and is often regarded as the theological core of the epistle.[8]

The writer begins by praising God, who has revealed "the mystery of his will" (1:9). Verse 10 elaborates on this will: God seeks "to bring unity to all things in heaven

[8] Jody A. Barnard, "Unity in Christ: The Purpose of Ephesians," *The Expository Times* 120, no. 4 (January 2009): 167–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524608099799, 167.

and on earth under Christ." The Greek term ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι (to bring together) conveys the unification of diverse elements.[9] We can envision a grand picture in which everything in creation is being harmonized and ordered through Christ. It is like a vast puzzle where each piece gradually finds its place, ultimately resulting in peace and wholeness. These verses are often considered "the key to unlocking the magnificent riches of the letter."[10]

In the context of the Roman Empire, diversity was a pervasive reality. The empire encompassed numerous races, cultures, and religions, presenting potential challenges to social cohesion. The emperor maintained unity by demanding recognition as Kurios, or Lord. Early Christians adopted this title for Christ as a declaration of reverence. The simple confession "Jesus is Lord" summarized the foundational faith of believers.[11] In Ephesians, this lordship underscores that diversity within the church is intended to culminate in unity under Christ.

Ephesians 4:15 further employs the metaphor of the head to signify Christ's authority, describing Him as "above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name" (1:21). For Roman Gentiles converting to Christianity, this declaration challenged their allegiance to the emperor as Kurios. At the same time, it helped them grasp the concept of ultimate unity under the authority of Christ. Through this unity, the church can navigate diversity, fostering spiritual maturity and coherence in the body of Christ.

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[9] Barnard, "Unity in Christ," 168.

[10] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 58-65.

[11] Phil Moore, *Straight to the Heart of Romans* (Oxford, England: Monarch Books, 2011), 172-175.

In many New Testament books, spiritual gifts are attributed to the Holy Spirit, but Ephesians 4:7 states, “Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (NRSV). In Ephesians 4:11, it is Christ who grants gifts to the church’s leadership, including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These gifts and roles for the work of ministry are diverse yet unified in Christ. Diversity among leaders is intended to be respected rather than divisive, as long as their service is rooted in Christ and not influenced by false teachings. Christ’s gifts equip God’s people for service and the building up of the body of Christ, opening opportunities for various leadership expressions within the church.

The early church communities in Asia Minor functioned more as household-based entities than formal organizations. They were composed of people of diverse ages, genders, backgrounds, and social statuses, including Jews and Greeks, men and women, free individuals, and slaves. In Christ, these diverse backgrounds were transformed into a unified identity. Galatians 3:28 affirms this unity: “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Their diversity posed no barrier within the Christian community when grounded in Christ.

Maintaining and restoring unity is impossible apart from Christ. Ephesians 4:11-16 emphasizes Christ as the head of the body and the Lord who reigns over all, granting gifts to establish the church. The unity depicted here does not erase differences of race, social status, or culture. Instead, it is a unity derived from active participation in Christ.[12]

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[12] Isam E. Ballenger, “Ephesians 4:1–16,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 51, no. 3 (July 1997): 292–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/002096439605100309, 294.

Believers are not tasked with creating unity on their own; rather, unity is a gift received through Christ, harmonizing diversity within the body.

This unity does not require the loss of diversity. Instead, differences are integrated in love through Christ. Ephesians 3:17 describes Christ dwelling within believers, "rooted and established in love" (NRSV). The writer's ultimate goal is for readers to be firmly grounded in love. In the exhortation section, the text provides practical guidance for living out this love. Ephesians 4:15-16 urges believers to "speak the truth in love" and to grow and build up the body in love. A church that matures in love embodies unity in Christ and becomes a visible witness of God's reconciling work to the world.

Growth into Christ

Alongside unity, maturity is another central theme in Ephesians 4:11-16. While Christ is acknowledged as Lord, believers remain a work in progress, called to grow toward "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:13). This emphasis on growth highlights that faith is dynamic, intended to evolve over time. The purpose of this growth is to move believers from spiritual infancy to maturity. Ephesians 4:12 notes, "Then we will no longer be infants," underscoring the condition of those who lack maturity.

The imagery of infants conveys a clear warning. Just as a ship without a captain is vulnerable to drifting, immature believers can be easily influenced by shifting opinions and trends, described as being "tossed and blown around by every wind" (4:14, CEB).

Like infants, such believers may struggle with certainty in their faith, lack wisdom, and find it difficult to discern truth from falsehood.[13]

The contrast between becoming mature (4:13) and the condition of infants (4:14) emphasizes that immaturity is not merely a temporary state. It requires intentional growth. Immature Christians are more susceptible to deception and may fail to recognize or resist false teachings. Spiritual maturity, therefore, equips believers with knowledge, stability, and discernment, enabling them to stand firm in the faith and contribute meaningfully to the life of the church.

In the context of Ephesians, Christians are warned that they will inevitably encounter false teachings, which may take the form of various religious philosophies or deceptive doctrines. These teachings have the potential to undermine both the unity of faith and the knowledge of God that believers are called to pursue. Although the author does not provide specific examples, these threats reflect the general challenges faced by those who are not firmly grounded in their faith.

The false teachers are deliberate in their intent to deceive, employing cunning and systematic schemes to lead vulnerable individuals astray. The Greek term "κυβεία" (cunning) in Ephesians 4:14 recalls the Serpent's deception of Eve (Genesis 3:1-9), emphasizing the deliberate intent to mislead. Similarly, "μεθοδείαν" (scheming) refers to a calculated approach designed to ensnare and corrupt, much like a predator stalking its prey.[14]

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[13] E.D. Mbennah, "The Goal of Maturity in Ephesians 4:13-16," *Acta Theologica* 36, no. 1 (October 17, 2016): 110, https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v36i1.7, 128-129.

[14] John Muddiman, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, England: Continuum, 2006), 207.

In Ephesians, these false teachings create a hostile environment within the Christian community, where misleading ideas can infiltrate and disrupt the unity and growth of believers. Consequently, spiritual maturity is not merely desirable. It is essential for the well-being of the church, equipping believers to discern truth from error and to maintain the integrity and vitality of the body of Christ.

The term "Καταρτισμός" (to equip, Ephesians 4:12) conveys the idea of preparing, training, and disciplining individuals to become proficient in a specific task.[15] In Ephesians 4:11, the roles of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are introduced as those who serve the church by equipping believers for ministry and fostering the growth of the body of Christ, grounded in the truth.[16] It is crucial to remember that these gifts are given by Christ. Spiritual growth occurs through the instruction and guidance of those called and gifted in Christ; without Him, neither teaching nor growth is possible. Without sound teaching, Christian maturity becomes challenging, leaving believers vulnerable to confusion or error.

John Wesley played a pivotal role in cultivating lay leadership within the Methodist movement. As the movement expanded, the need for leaders to serve, guide, and instruct believers grew, but there was a shortage of clergy to meet these needs. In response, Wesley turned to laypersons, recognizing the gifts God had bestowed upon them. He empowered them to lead prayer meetings, Bible studies, and offer exhortation

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[15] John Muddiman, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, England: Continuum, 2006), 207.

[16] James Luther Mays et al., *Ephesians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, New Testament* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 54.

when necessary.[17] The contributions of these lay leaders were both abundant and distinctive. Wesley understood that their gifts were God-given tools for building up the body of Christ. By creating opportunities for laypersons to exercise their gifts, he ensured that these talents were actively used for the growth and vitality of the church, rather than remaining dormant.

Laypersons led class meetings, where Methodists shared their spiritual experiences and offered mutual encouragement. They played a vital role in pastoral care and in the discipleship of members. Women held leadership roles and important positions within these meetings, representing a significant advancement given the societal norms of the time. The primary criterion for leadership was the presence of gifts from God, transcending all other qualifications. Conversely, the absence of lay leadership is often seen as a disheartening indicator of decline within the church.[18]

Kevin Watson describes Wesley's class meeting as a "transformation-driven group." Participants in these meetings learn how to live according to the teachings of the gospel and grow in Christ.[19] The focus is on transformation, not merely the acquisition of information. As participants experience life-changing moments in these meetings, sanctification takes place in their lives, reflecting progress toward becoming more Christlike. This approach aligns with the goal of Ephesians 4:13: "to reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature." Class meetings are therefore more than small groups for information sharing. They serve as spaces where

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[17] Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2013), 125-127.

[18] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 95.

[19] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 6-7.

Christians mature toward "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" by connecting with God and with one another in Christ.

The church is not a perfect community but one in constant growth and development. Hence, maturity in the faith becomes a critical aspect of church vitality. Spiritual growth involves transitioning from spiritual infancy to maturity, moving from being "tossed back and forth by the waves" (4:14) to attaining "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:13). This process of maturation not only strengthens individual believers but also equips them to navigate challenges both within and beyond the faith community, contributing significantly to the vitality and health of the church.

The Body of Christ

Metaphors are powerful linguistic tools used in Ephesians and throughout the New Testament to convey abstract concepts and spiritual truths through vivid and relatable imagery. Nortje-Meyer observes that metaphors in the New Testament "point to realities beyond themselves. We use them to speak about the invisible, to understand and explain human affairs and the world of God."[20] They provide a way to communicate unseen and spiritual dimensions of life, making complex ideas more accessible.[21]

When someone uses a metaphor, they create a mental image that helps explain a deeper meaning or truth. In Ephesians, metaphors such as adoption, inheritance, the body of Christ, and the armor of God illustrate various aspects of the Christian faith and the

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[20] Lilly Nortjé-Meyer, "Questioning the 'Perfect Male Body': A Critical Reading of Ephesians 4:13," *Scriptura* 90, no. 0 (June 12, 2013): 731, https://doi.org/10.7833/90-0-1063, 731.

[21] Alta Vrey, "The Body Metaphor Reinforcing the Identity of the In-Group in Ephesians," *Neotestamentica* 53, no. 2 (2019): 375–93, https://doi.org/10.1353/neo.2019.0023, 379-380.

believer's relationship with God. These images help readers grasp profound spiritual concepts and engage with the teachings in a more tangible and relatable way.

In Ephesians 4:11-16, the metaphor of the "body of Christ" is particularly impactful. It conveys a powerful message about unity, maturity, and interconnection within the Christian community. Just as a physical body has different parts, each with its unique function, so too should members of the church maintain their distinct roles while remaining interconnected. This metaphor highlights that unity does not require the loss of individuality; rather, it celebrates the unique contributions of each member in building a healthy, functioning body of believers.

Additionally, the body must experience growth, similar to the development of a child's body. If any part fails to grow alongside the others, the entire body may suffer from weakness and dysfunction. This underscores the importance of growing together as a community and ensuring that no member remains underdeveloped or isolated. In essence, the metaphor of the body of Christ conveys the principles of unity, maturity, and interconnection within the Christian community. Just as a healthy body relies on the proper function of all its parts, the church thrives when its members cooperate, utilize their unique gifts, and grow in their faith.

The concept of the "body of Christ" finds its roots in the believer's relationship with Christ and carries significant theological implications in both Colossians and Ephesians. In Colossians 1:15-20, Christ is depicted as the divine wisdom active in creation and, subsequently, as the redeemer. In His role as redeemer, Christ becomes the head of the body, which is the church. The church is described as the "firstborn from the dead," emphasizing its unique place in God's redemptive plan. Furthermore, Colossians

1:19 introduces the concept of "fullness", which informs the understanding of the church in Ephesians. In Colossians, "fullness" refers to the divine presence residing in Christ, while in Ephesians, it denotes how Christ dwells within the body of Christ, the church, uniting and sustaining it in love.[22]

In Ephesians, Christ is presented as the head, and the church as the body of Christ, clarifying the relationship between Christ and the church.[23] This establishes a vertical connection with Christ as the head, while the relationships among the various parts and organs within the body represent horizontal connections. Each part is meant to serve the others, avoiding the establishment of supremacy over one another. The diversity of these parts is acknowledged and celebrated, with the various gifts from Christ fostering the growth and proper functioning of the body.

The church in Ephesians is depicted as a community composed of diverse members, each with different identities prior to becoming Christians. While this diversity is recognized, it has the potential to threaten the unity of the body if individuals cling too tightly to their distinct identities. Under the headship of Christ, however, all members are given a shared identity, enabling them to maintain unity despite their differing roles. The body metaphor emphasizes that individual differences are valuable but must operate in submission to the head to ensure cohesion. No part can separate from the body and continue to function effectively.[24] Each part requires vertical alignment with Christ to thrive. In the authority of Christ, unity is achievable despite diversity, allowing members

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[22] Sampley et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 11*, 358-359.

[23] Steven B. Cowan, and Peter Toon. *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 134.

[24] Vrey, "The Body Metaphor Reinforcing the Identity of the In-Group in Ephesians," 389.

to function harmoniously. Conversely, without this connection and submission to the head, even well-intentioned actions by diverse members can inadvertently cause harm within the body.

The use of the body metaphor in Ephesians introduces gendered language and imagery, which may stereotype and potentially limit the roles of individuals within the church. In Ephesians 4:13, the term "ἄνδρα" (ˈan.dra) is used, referring specifically to a male person, rather than the more inclusive term "ἄνθρωπος" (anthrōpos), which denotes a human being without gender specificity. The deliberate choice of "a male person" is significant, as it presents the image of a full-grown man as complete (τέλειον) and mature.[25] Consequently, this gender-specific imagery may implicitly limit the roles attributed to women and young people within the church.

In Greek and Roman culture, perceptions of male and female bodies carried significant social implications. According to Vorster, women were commonly associated with nature, reproduction, childbearing, and domestic/private spheres, emphasizing their biological functions. Men, in contrast, were linked to culture and the public sphere, highlighting activity, authority, and strength. These gendered distinctions placed women in a comparatively lower hierarchical position.[26] The female body was often described as passive and weak, whereas the male body was depicted as active and strong. Such stereotypes were used to maintain social order, reinforce divisions between groups, and justify hierarchical distinctions.

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[25] Mbennah, "The Goal of Maturity in Ephesians 4:13-16," 123-124.

[26] Vrey, "The Body Metaphor Reinforcing the Identity of the In-Group in Ephesians," 382.

However, gender did not uniformly determine religious participation in all contexts. Historical evidence shows that in some Greek and Roman cults, women held the highest leadership roles.[27] In Jewish religious practice, while women generally played supportive roles, assisting their husbands in performing religious duties, they were not entirely excluded from spiritual engagement. These cultural and historical considerations illustrate that while the body metaphor in Ephesians emphasizes maturity through a male image, it interacts with broader societal gender norms that could both reflect and shape perceptions of authority and participation within the church.

In the early Christian church, there was indeed some disagreement regarding the role of women. Gentile women who converted to Christianity had previously been accustomed to the active roles that Greek and Roman women played in religious practices.[28] This cultural background sometimes created obstacles for them to fully integrate into the Christian community, as they were often expected to relinquish their roles and leadership positions in the name of unity.

The implicit meanings of gender roles and bodily metaphors in the Greek and Roman world exerted influence on the early church. These cultural norms made it challenging to establish practices entirely free from gender expectations.[29] Given this context, it may not have been easy for the author of Ephesians to employ fully gender-neutral language, such as replacing "a male" body with more inclusive terms.

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[27] Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of The Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1992), 81-82.

[28] Kraemer. *Her Share of The Blessings*, 141.

[29] Vrey, "The Body Metaphor Reinforcing the Identity of the In-Group in Ephesians," 378.

Nevertheless, contemporary interpretation can understand the phrase "a male person" in a gender-neutral sense, such as "a human being," without diminishing the original emphasis on maturity. In modern contexts, the connection between being male and maturity is not necessarily assumed. In this light, the unity expressed in Christ, as articulated in Galatians 3:28, embraces both "male and female" and all distinct individuals within the body of Christ. This understanding allows all believers to grow together toward "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13), celebrating diversity while pursuing maturity and unity in faith.

Conclusion

Ivy Creek UMC is located in a community marked by diversity in race, ethnicity, language, education, and income. Over its long history, the church has become home to a wide range of theological perspectives. This situation closely mirrors the challenges faced by the early church addressed in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The wisdom contained in Ephesians continues to provide guidance for cultivating a vibrant and healthy church today.

Unity is essential for a church navigating such diversity. However, unity does not require the sacrifice of individuality, except when false teachings threaten the faith and the community. This principle resonates with the maxim: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."[30] True unity is achieved under the authority of Christ, the head of the church. Yet this foundational truth is sometimes overlooked, with

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[30] Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub., 2002), 33.

churches relying primarily on human effort to embrace differences and maintain harmony. Without connection to Christ's headship, even a superficial unity cannot fully establish or sustain the body of Christ.

Maturity is a crucial element in sustaining the vitality of the church. Ephesians encourages all believers to progress beyond the stage of "infants" in their faith. Leadership roles should not be limited to clergy alone, as all members of the church possess gifts granted by Christ. Even when each individual has been given a gift, maturity cannot be fully realized if these gifts function in isolation. Growth occurs when each part of the body fulfills its role while remaining well-connected to the other parts. Spiritual development, therefore, is not achieved merely through cultivating personal gifts. It is realized when individuals recognize their place within the body and maintain healthy connections with others.

The body metaphor in Ephesians offers a tangible representation of unity, maturity, and interconnection within the Christian community. These concepts are intrinsically linked, forming a harmonious unity under the lordship of Christ. However, there is a potential risk in interpreting the term "ἀνήρ" (a male person) in Ephesians 4:13 as suggesting that ultimate maturity is represented solely by the image of an adult male. Such an interpretation could inadvertently limit the participation of women and young members in achieving mature Christian faith. It is essential to understand that the gifts given by Christ are not restricted by gender, age, or other differences. These diverse gifts are vital for establishing and nurturing the body of Christ. True Christian maturity is attained not by conforming to an idealized image of male perfection but through the growth of the whole body together toward "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

It is worth remembering that churches during the time of Ephesians were typically house-based. These early gatherings closely resembled the small groups found in contemporary churches. Unity and maturity were often more effectively nurtured in these smaller settings, which allowed for deep interconnectedness with God and with one another. Therefore, small groups play a crucial role in fostering both unity and growth in Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-16 serves several key purposes. It promotes unity within a diverse church community, particularly among Jewish and Gentile believers, by fostering interconnectedness in Christ. It also emphasizes the authority of Christ as the head of the church, holding power over all. Furthermore, it encourages believers to continue growing together within the body of Christ. Unity and maturity within small groups can be realized even among diverse members when they remain connected under the headship of Christ, functioning as interdependent parts of the body.

Small groups inevitably contain diversity, which, if left unmanaged, can lead to conflict and weaken the church's vitality. This is why connection to Christ as the head is essential. When each member functions as a healthy part of the body under His authority, unity and maturity emerge. The deep spiritual relationships formed in small groups not only strengthen the individuals involved but also contribute to the vitality of the entire church. This demonstrates that the interconnection fostered within small groups plays a critical role for both personal growth and the overall health of the body of Christ.

Through Ephesians 4:11–16, I have explored how diversity can be maintained within the body of Christ while unity is preserved, as believers remain connected to Christ and to one another. This naturally raises the question: have there been concrete

historical instances where these biblical principles have been applied and embodied? In the following chapter, I will turn to such historical developments, examining how the biblical teachings previously discussed have been experienced in real life and how small groups have served as a significant means of embodying these principles.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

"Silence" is a novel written by Shusaku Endo in 1966. It is set in 17th-century Japan during a period of severe persecution against Christians. The story follows a young Jesuit priest, Sebastião Rodrigues, who journeys to Japan in search of his mentor, Father Ferreira. Rodrigues struggles to believe the rumor that his mentor has renounced his faith. As he traces Ferreira's path, Rodrigues witnesses the brutal persecution endured by Japanese Christians for maintaining their faith. In this time of suffering, God seems silent, prompting the Jesuit priest to cry out, "Lord, why are you silent?"

Similarly, present-day churches often face seasons that feel as if God is silent amid challenges. Many denominational churches in the United States have experienced declining membership and vitality, despite expanding programs and worship styles. While learning about Christianity may be accessible, cultivating a close, personal relationship with God often seems less prioritized.

A survey conducted by MissionInsite in Albemarle County, Virginia, where Ivy Creek UMC is located, highlights several reasons people do not attend church: religious people are perceived as too judgmental, organized religion is distrusted, religious leaders are not trusted, and church is considered irrelevant to daily life.[1] These responses reflect

[1] MissionInsite, *The FullInsite Report – Study Area: Albemarle County in Virginia*, 3.

broken trust and weakened relationships between the church and the surrounding community.

Unfortunately, such relational breakdowns are not confined to the church's relationship with the community. Even within the congregation, issues of trust and weakened interpersonal relationships can arise. Often, diminished relationships among members coincide with a neglect of one's relationship with God. Over time, this relational erosion can undermine the overall health and vitality of the church.

Clergy and church members alike often sense a silence from God during challenging times, frequently without understanding the vital importance of nurturing a close relationship with God and with one another regardless of how effective church programs and activities may appear.

In Christian history, a movement emerged in the 17th century that emphasized personal encounters with God in worship and meetings: the Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers. Their teachings and way of life appeared radical. They rejected being bound by religious rituals and dogma that were disconnected from everyday life, instead pursuing freedom in the Spirit and denying the exclusive authority of the church and clergy. In their worship, silence was not merely an absence of response but an active practice of listening, allowing participants to experience the presence of God. This approach drew curiosity and participation from those seeking a deeper spiritual life.

In this chapter, I aim to explore the origins and evolution of the Quaker movement, seeking insights applicable to contemporary small group practices. By applying these insights, modern ministries and churches may revitalize through fostering

deeper connections with God and with one another. Examining the Quaker movement not only enriches our understanding of church history but also opens pathways for a more vibrant and engaging spiritual journey.

The Beginning of Quakers

God created the universe out of nothing, yet human history typically advances through a dialectical process, generating an antithesis from an existing thesis. History progresses not from complete novelty but in response to, or in contrast with, what already exists. The emergence of the Quakers is no exception. Understanding the historical context of 17th-century Britain is therefore crucial to comprehending the beginnings of the Quaker movement.

The 17th century in Britain was marked by intense political tension between the monarchy and Parliament. James I (1603–1625) faced conflicts with Parliament over taxation, a struggle that continued under his son, Charles I (1625–1649). These disputes ultimately led to the English Civil War (1640–1649) between Royalists and Parliamentarians. The war concluded with the victory of the Parliamentarians, led by Oliver Cromwell, resulting in the execution of Charles I and the establishment of the Commonwealth of England under Cromwell's leadership (1649–1660). Cromwell enforced strict Puritan rules during his governance. The Puritans, a group of Protestants seeking to purify the Church of England, emphasized the authority of the Bible, advocated the doctrine of predestination as taught by John Calvin, and upheld strict moral standards. They valued diligence, piety, and simplicity, viewing extravagance and indulgence as sinful. Following Cromwell's death in 1658, his son succeeded him, but the

Commonwealth's restrictive rule soon waned. British society, weary of Puritan moral constraints and limitations on personal freedoms, restored the monarchy under Charles II (1660–1674). The Restoration significantly altered the treatment of Puritans, leading to renewed persecution. Many Puritans chose to migrate to North America in search of religious freedom. This turbulent historical backdrop of political conflict, moral rigor, and religious tension set the stage for the emergence of the Quaker movement, which sought a new path in worship, spirituality, and community life.[2]

In this historical context, the emergence of the Quakers was inevitably shaped by existing influences. As a Christian group, early Quakers were both positively and negatively affected by the Puritans, one of the dominant Christian movements in 17th-century Britain. The Puritans promoted simple, disciplined lifestyles and avoided extravagance, a principle that has had a lasting influence on Quaker practices. This influence is evident in the plain dress and lifestyle of Quakers, including the 18th-century "wideawake hat" and bonnet in Quaker grey. They closed their shops to attend worship on Wednesdays and Sundays, lived in modest homes, and practiced restrained consumption.[3]

However, Quakers also diverged sharply from Puritan beliefs. They rejected the doctrine of predestination, emphasizing equality and the removal of hierarchical structures. For Quakers, salvation was not predetermined. Instead, they upheld the

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[2] Maurice Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2022), 50-144.

[3] Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13-14.

potential for all to experience God's guidance and grace. This theological contrast represented an antithesis, offering a different path in history.

The Great Civil War, changes in social structures between monarchy and Commonwealth, and the persecution of Christians, especially Puritans, shaped the spiritual outlook of early Quakers. They placed a strong emphasis on the Second Coming and the Last Day, believing that they were living at the forefront of this eschatological event. Early Quakers anticipated the arrival of Jesus as a transformative force for the world.[4] However, much like the early church, as the anticipated Second Coming did not occur immediately, their intense focus on it gradually diminished over time.

Oliver Cromwell's strict enforcement of Puritan rules after the Great Civil War left a lasting mark on British society. The early Quakers observed firsthand the consequences of authorities imposing rigid rules on people without fostering a personal encounter with God. Within the hierarchical church structure, priests held the authority to interpret the Bible and administer sacraments, and ordinary believers relied on them to connect with God. The early Quakers opposed this outward structure, asserting that individuals did not need priests, prescribed interpretations of Scripture, rituals, or sacraments to experience God inwardly. They believed that God spoke directly to the entire body of believers, and this spiritual equality enabled a powerful, personal encounter with God distinct from traditional church rituals.

The early Quakers also witnessed the tragedies of war during the Great Civil War. Many had served in the Parliamentary armies, yet they later chose to adopt a stance of nonviolence. Their wartime experiences likely reinforced their desire for peace. Although

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[4] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 9.

some Quakers have participated in wars over the centuries, the principle of rejecting outward conflict as a means of resolving disputes or establishing peace has remained central to their tradition.[5]

Through these experiences, the early Quakers influenced society by emphasizing a personal encounter with God, equality beyond hierarchical structures, and a commitment to peace. Their faith and way of life did not arise spontaneously but developed and evolved through continuous engagement with the social, political, and religious challenges of their time.

Traits of Quakers

Quakers underwent various changes over time and eventually divided into different branches: Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Quakerism. Despite these distinctions, all branches share foundational beliefs rooted in the early Quaker movement, though these beliefs are interpreted and practiced differently. In this section, I will focus on four key traits of the early Quakers: inward encounter with God, spiritual equality, understanding of rituals and sacraments, and commitment to peace. It is important to note that these traits evolved over time, and their understanding varied across contexts. A more detailed exploration of these differences is provided later in the section titled "Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Quakerism."

Firstly, the core of Quaker faith lies in the inward encounter with God. Quakers emphasize experiencing the presence of God directly in daily life, worship, and church

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[5] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 14.

business.[6] They actively seek to be aware of God's presence and to listen inwardly to God.

George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, discovered through his experiences that spiritual reality and power were not found in human creations such as books, traditional norms, doctrines, or external authority; rather, it was embodied in Jesus Christ. Fox emphasized the inward experience of hearing the voice of Christ, transforming his critique of external structures into a positive proclamation: "Christ has come to teach his people himself."[7] This teaching goes beyond intellectual knowledge, requiring personal experience and practice in individual life. Fox challenged others by asking, "You will say, Christ saith this and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say?"[8] Every individual, he insisted, has a direct, personal connection with God through the inner Light.

Silence was adopted by the Quakers as a medium to experience the presence of God. It was not merely a time to be quiet; rather, it signified stillness and active waiting for God's guidance. Quaker worship and church business meetings sought God's presence through this deliberate silence. Within this silence, participants engaged in active listening and developed an expectation for God's interaction, deepening their relationship with the Divine.

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[6] Canby Jones, "Worship as Experienced," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 36, Article 3 (1973), 18.

[7] William W. Stafford, "Quaker Worship," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 54, Article 2 (1982), 12.

[8] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 75-76.

The second defining trait of Quakers is their belief in spiritual equality, rooted in the idea that God speaks directly to everyone. George Fox emphasized that direct revelation was central to the Quaker movement. While the church traditionally upheld the Bible as the authoritative source of knowledge about God, Fox argued that personal, direct revelation should take precedence and is given equally to all individuals.[9] Quakers often refer to Jeremiah 31:31-34 to affirm this spiritual equality within the new covenant, emphasizing that no intermediaries are required.[10]

This principle of equality also informed Quakers' social actions. They were ahead of their time in advocating against slavery, recognizing that God's revelation is accessible to all, regardless of race, social status, gender, or hierarchical position. Such actions flowed naturally from their understanding and application of spiritual equality.

Spiritual equality creates a space where each person's relationship with God is respected. One's own experiences with God are not considered superior to another's. Instead, the faith journey of each individual is honored. In this environment, diversity within small groups is naturally preserved, and such diversity becomes a source of unity in Christ. It also serves as a catalyst for mutual spiritual growth. Thus, spiritual equality goes beyond mere parity, fostering respect, deep companionship, and interconnectedness among believers.

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[9] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 4.

[10] Stephen W. Angell, *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 122.

Thirdly, Quakers hold a distinctive understanding of rituals and sacraments. While sacraments are typically defined as "an outward sign of inward grace,"[11] Quakers deliberately avoid rituals as expressions of faith. George Fox rejected outward signs, denouncing practices such as images, crosses, infant sprinkling, holy days, and other traditions. He explained, "I was commanded to bring people off from all the world's fellowship, and praying, and singings, which stood in forms without power. … I was to bring people off … from all their images and crosses and sprinkling of infants, with all their holy days (so called) and all their vain traditions, which they had gotten up since the Apostles' days…"[12]

This rejection, however, does not diminish the Quakers' commitment to a sacred life. Rather than relying on external rituals, they emphasize the internal and spiritual dimensions of faith, focusing on a sacramental life rooted in personal encounter with God.[13]

For Quakers, there is no separation between what is considered sacred and what is ordinary. Living sacramentally means viewing all of life as sacred. Early Quakers did not assign special significance to specific days such as Sundays, Christmas, or Easter. Every place was equally holy, and they could gather for worship anywhere.[14] Meeting Houses were only constructed when homes could not accommodate everyone.

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[11] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (West Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 494.

[12] Stafford, "Quaker Worship," 11-12.

[13] Geoffrey Durham, *The Spirit of the Quakers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

[14] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 9-11.

This understanding of sacred space highlights that small group gatherings do not need to be confined to a church building or any particular location. A home gathering can become a sacred space where God is present. In such settings, participants can cultivate not only their relationship with God but also deeper connections with one another. The focus shifts from the physical location to the presence of God, creating a more comfortable and relational environment for sharing life and fostering spiritual growth.

The final trait is their commitment to peace and pacifism. Quakers express their faith by refusing to participate in wars and actively working to prevent them. Since the 1600s, they have consistently opposed violence, rejecting military drafts, disobeying war-related laws, and supporting peace efforts. This commitment is formalized in modern Quakerism as the "Peace Testimony."[15] The first official statement of the Peace Testimony was issued to King Charles II following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, affirming:

> Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all. All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world.[16]

Quakers believe that outward wars cannot bring true peace; rather, inward spiritual resources and the presence of God are essential for fostering peace in the world. This perspective emphasizes the connection between sacramental living and global reconciliation.

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[15] Matt Rosen, "'This Is Our Testimony to the Whole World': Quaker Peace Work and Religious Experience," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (July 6, 2022): 623, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070623, 623.

[16] Meredith B. Weddle, *Walking in the Way of Peace: Quaker Pacifism in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 234.

Pink Dandelion identifies these four traits as central theological ideas of Quakerism: "direct inward encounter with God," "corporate direct guidance," "spiritual equality," and "a commitment to peace and pacifism."[17] These principles are evident throughout the Quaker journey and continue to shape their communal and spiritual practices today.

Quaker Worship

In Quaker worship, the principles described in the previous section are realized practically and intensely. Worship is a central aspect of Christianity, serving as an expression of faith that transcends denominational distinctions. While Quaker worship shares the same ultimate purpose as other Christian traditions, its form is distinctive.

Quakers emphasize experiential encounters with the divine during worship, prioritizing direct experience over intellectual understanding or ritualistic participation. George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, conveyed this emphasis in a 1655 letter to Friends: "In all your Meetings know and feel the Power, and the Seed … of the Lord God amongst you, over you, and in you; then in that ye will feel the Presence of the Lord God dwelling in the midst of you."[18]

Early Quakers focused on the tangible experience of God's presence in their gatherings. They met in silence, sitting together without prescribed orders or formal liturgy. While Meetings may appear to outsiders as quiet and passive, the participants

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[17] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 2-3.

[18] Jones, "Worship as Experienced," 23.

were actively engaged, attentively awaiting God's presence. Silence was not the goal but a medium for encountering the divine.

Edward Burrough, an early Quaker, described the experience of worship in moments of silence:

> While waiting upon the Lord in silence, as often we did for many hours together, with our minds and hearts toward him, being stayed in the light of Christ within us from all thoughts, fleshly motions and desires, we received often the pouring down of the spirit upon us, and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosened, and our mouths opened, and we spoke with new tongues, as the Lord gave us utterance, and his spirit led us, which was poured upon sons and daughters.[19]

Through this attentive, silent waiting, Quakers experienced God's presence actively, cultivating a deep, personal encounter with the divine. The early Quakers believed that the Holy Spirit guided them to God's presence, especially during group worship. George Fox considered this practice a revival of early Christianity.

Although silence was highly valued, it did not prevent speaking during worship. "Vocal ministry" was an accepted part of Quaker worship, reflecting apostolic and prophetic guidance inspired by God's revelation. Anyone, regardless of gender, social status, or background, could speak when led by God. There were no formal church leaders or fixed hierarchies of spiritual authority. All participants were spiritually equal in worship.[20] Quakers grounded this practice in John 1:9, which affirms the light of Christ in every individual.

Vocal ministry offers significant insight for small group settings, showing how participants can share their faith journeys amid silence. Silence in Quaker worship is not

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[19] Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, 37-38.

[20] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 39.

merely about being quiet. It is an active practice of listening to God. Vocal ministry demonstrates how a personal encounter with God can extend to relationships with others. The grace and challenges experienced in one's spiritual journey are not kept private but shared within the group. No one is given exclusive authority to speak; anyone who receives guidance from God may share.

In this way, Quaker vocal ministry suggests a valuable application for small groups: the grace experienced by one individual is not confined to them alone but can become a shared blessing for all. Through such sharing, the spiritual experiences of individuals contribute to the growth and unity of the entire group.

Quakers constructed Meeting Houses for corporate worship, reflecting their emphasis on spiritual equality. Unlike many churches where pews face the altar, Quaker Meeting Houses arrange chairs toward the center of the worship space, removing focus from any single location.[21] This arrangement fosters community and encourages equal participation in vocal ministry during worship.

The personal experience of worshippers centered on the belief in a direct connection with God, questioning the necessity of ordained clergy. In such encounters, "Christ has come to teach his people himself,"[22] eliminating the need for clergy. Leadership by clergy was removed, allowing worship to be spontaneous rather than programmed, reducing reliance on prepared sermons or interpretations. George Fox and his followers rejected what they saw as meaningless rituals, removing any planned or

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[21] Durham, *The Spirit of the Quakers*, 5.

[22] Stafford, "Quaker Worship", 12.

prearranged elements from worship. If elaborate church ceremonies resemble a well-rehearsed musical, Fox's approach resembled spontaneous worship led by the Spirit.[23]

Over time, Quaker understanding of clergy evolved. Evangelical Quakers adopted pastoral leadership, often adding preaching to their worship, whereas Liberal Quakers continue to emphasize that all may speak if led by the Divine. Regardless of style, the priority is always experiencing God's presence.

This understanding of clergy provides significant insight for small groups regarding leadership. In contemporary churches, clergy often automatically assume leadership roles in small groups. However, Quaker practice suggests that the experience of God's presence is far more crucial than the formal position of a leader. John Wesley similarly empowered spiritually mature and capable laypersons to lead Methodist class meetings. In these gatherings, God's grace was experienced, and lives were transformed, demonstrating that leadership is not confined to clergy but is rooted in spiritual readiness and divine guidance.

Quakers hold a distinctive stance on sacraments. Unlike many churches that observe outward sacraments such as the Lord's Supper and baptism, Quakers do not employ formal ceremonies. Instead, they emphasize inner spiritual experiences, highlighting the profound impact of an authentic, internal baptism by the Holy Spirit.[24] For Quakers, personal encounters during worship are more transformative than traditional rites, creating deeper, lasting spiritual connections.

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[23] Benjamin Lloyd, "The Paradox of Quaker Theatre," *New Theatre Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (August 2007): 219–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0266464x07000127, 224.

[24] *Faith & Practice - Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 2007), 32.

Quakers also approach the Bible differently than other Christian denominations. In many modern Quaker Meetings, the Bible is seldom used as the centerpiece of worship. Although George Fox, the founder, deeply studied and cherished the Scriptures, he emphasized that the Holy Spirit holds ultimate authority in matters of faith experience. For Quakers, the Bible is valuable not merely for its words but for its internalization in the heart and life. Without inward transformation and guidance by the Spirit, Scripture can remain "mere words."[25] To be truly alive, the Bible must inspire life change.

The Quaker understanding of clergy, sacraments, and Scripture collectively resists manipulation by institutional authority or tradition. Worship is not defined by external rituals or formal structures but by direct encounters with God that bring about authentic transformation. William W. Stafford observes that something extraordinary occurs in Quaker worship: individuals experience life change in the Light of Christ, discerning God's will and beginning to live in God's kingdom in the present rather than merely awaiting it in the afterlife.[26] These personal experiences, shared collectively, foster profound community and societal transformation, linking worship intimately with action and witness in the world.

Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Quakerism

Quakerism has gradually developed into several distinct branches since the time of the early Friends, most notably Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Quakerism.

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[25] Jones, "Worship as Experienced," 25-27.

[26] Stafford, "Quaker Worship," 14-15.

Each has been shaped by historical, cultural, and theological influences, resulting in significant diversity in belief and worship.

Evangelical Quakerism aligns closely with traditional Christian doctrines, including the Trinity, the authority of Scripture, and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. While inner spiritual experience remains valued, the Bible is given greater weight than personal impressions. Worship in Evangelical Quaker communities is generally programmed, including sermons delivered by clergy and the singing of hymns. This marks a departure from the unprogrammed silence of early Quaker meetings. Evangelical Friends also emphasize evangelism and mission, drawing them closer in form and practice to other Protestant traditions and creating distance from early Quaker emphases on the inward priesthood, sacraments, and simplicity of church life.[27]

Conservative Quakerism, by contrast, seeks continuity with the practices of early Friends, resisting doctrinal innovations and preserving the experiential spirituality of unprogrammed worship. Meetings are held in silence, waiting attentively upon God's presence.[28] Vocal ministry, when it occurs, is received as a shared gift of the Spirit within an atmosphere of spiritual equality. Conservative Friends stress transformation and mutual accountability under the headship of Christ, emphasizing deep communal bonds and mutual support within the meeting.[29]

Liberal Quakerism emerged as a reaction to Evangelical Quakerism. Its foundation rests on the belief that experience should be primary rather than the Bible. It

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[27] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 59-61.

[28] Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism*, 244.

[29] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 65.

emphasizes that faith should be relevant to the current times, advocating for openness to embracing new ideas.[30] Liberal Quakerism encompasses a wide range of theological beliefs and is committed to inclusivity. It maintains a distinctive Quakerism that emphasizes the direct encounter with the Divine through experience. They continue to stress unprogrammed worship, embracing diverse beliefs and backgrounds from various spiritual and religious perspectives, making Christianity just one option among many. Ideas of sin and salvation are rarely mentioned, and they adopt the concept of "original blessings."[31] Silence in worship is valued, waiting for the Inner Light without adhering to specific doctrines.

The distinctions among Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Quakers can be summarized by their approaches to authority, worship, spiritual experience, and engagement with contemporary culture. While all branches retain the foundational Quaker emphasis on inward encounter with God, equality, and pacifism, they differ in how they prioritize Scripture, structure worship, and relate to broader society. The table below highlights these differences:[32]

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[30] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 65-66.

[31] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 68.

[32] Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 108-109.

Table 3. Differences between Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Friends

Aspect	Evangelical Quakerism	Conservative Quakerism	Liberal Quakerism
Theological Beliefs	Traditional Christian beliefs, Trinity	Resists theological changes, experiential focus	Embraces a wide range of beliefs, experiential focus
Authority	Bible-centered, greater authority than feelings	Bible-centered, direct encounter with God	Experience-centered, primary over the Bible
Salvation	Through faith in Jesus Christ	Emphasis on transformation, mutual accountability	Rarely mentions sin and salvation, "original blessings"
Worship Style	Programmed, clergy-led sermons and hymns	Unprogrammed, silent worship, vocal ministry	Unprogrammed, silent worship, emphasis on silence
Mission Engagement	Actively engaged in spreading faith through missions	Focus on connections within the meeting, mutual support	Emphasis on inclusivity, openness to new ideas

These distinctions highlight the diverse paths that Quakerism has taken, reflecting a spectrum of beliefs and practices within the broader Quaker tradition. While Quakers have adapted to changing times, they have consistently shared and maintained core principles. This flexibility provides an opportunity for applying their key practices, such as silence and spiritual equality, within contemporary small group settings. How active listening in silence is implemented and how spiritual equality is embraced can vary depending on the context, but the essential principles can be retained and applied effectively to foster deeper connection and growth within small groups.

Quakerism and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

The Quaker perspective on Scripture, tradition, and experience can be compared to the Methodist approach, particularly John Wesley's emphasis on four sources of

revelation: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.[33] Collectively, these sources are known as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," and they are considered essential for understanding God and the gospel message.

Wesley regarded Scripture as the primary "source of divine revelation,"[34] a stance that differs from that of the Quakers. For Wesley, Scripture reveals the trustworthy truth of how God provides salvation through the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It alone holds ultimate authority as the Word of God, containing God's self-revelation. Scripture serves as the primary standard for establishing doctrine, guiding humanity in righteousness, and providing the definitive criterion of faith.

Tradition, according to Alister McGrath, is an "active process of reflection by which theological or spiritual insights are valued, assessed, and transmitted from one generation to another."[35] God's revelation unfolds gradually over time through history and tradition. While tradition plays a significant role in interpreting Scripture and shaping religious beliefs, it is not considered infallible.[36] Tradition must always be evaluated in light of Scripture, which serves as the constant criterion.

Reason, in Wesley's view, is a "unique gift from God."[37] Despite human susceptibility to sin, God allows the use of reason to understand Him and interpret Scripture. Reason serves as a tool for thoughtful inquiry, prompting questions of faith and

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[33] *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 80-91.

[34] Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2005), 130.

[35] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 219.

[36] Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 153.

[37] Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 170.

leading to a deeper understanding of God's Word. However, reason alone is insufficient for fully comprehending the divine.

Wesley also emphasized that religion is fundamentally grounded in experience.[38] Experience, in this context, provides "new eyes" to interpret Scripture and uncover its truth.[39] For Wesley, personal experience confirms the truth of Scripture and reinforces one's understanding of God's work in life.[40]

The primary difference between Quakers and Methodists lies in the role of Scripture as the ultimate authority. Quakers prioritize personal experience over Scripture, while Methodists uphold Scripture as the primary authority. Quakers tend to reject institutional tradition, whereas Methodists embrace it as a way to discern God's revelation. Despite these differences, both traditions recognize the centrality of experience in the faith journey, understanding that encountering God's presence brings life to the church beyond mere rituals.

Quakerism may seem too radical for some, yet the interaction between Quaker and Methodist perspectives offers the potential for mutual enrichment. For Ivy Creek UMC, a Methodist church, adopting Quaker practices such as silence, inward reflection, and spiritual equality can help enrich the life of small groups. Applying these insights thoughtfully can significantly support the development of small groups, fostering deeper relationships with God and one another within the church.

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[38] Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 200.

[39] *The Book of Discipline*, 87.

[40] Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 202.

Conclusion

Quakers emerged in response to the social and religious challenges of 17th-century Britain, a period marked by political upheavals and the Great Civil War. Under Oliver Cromwell's strict Puritan rule, the early Quakers observed that outward rituals and hierarchical church structures failed to transform inner lives. In response, they emphasized a direct encounter with God, rejecting intermediaries such as clergy and rigid doctrines. Their faith was characterized by spiritual equality, a rejection of outward sacraments, and a steadfast commitment to peace.

These principles were most clearly expressed in their worship, where silence served as a medium for encountering God's presence. Vocal ministry was open to anyone led by the Spirit, reinforcing spiritual equality among participants. Although Quakerism later developed into distinct branches, Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal, the central emphasis on experiencing God's presence remained constant, shaping both individual lives and community practice.

For Quakers, silence was not merely the absence of sound but an active listening toward God. This practice can be extended to the way participants relate to one another in small groups. It does not mean simply remaining quiet; rather, it encourages respectful and attentive listening to others. Such active listening enables participants to honor the experiences and stories shared by others, even when they differ from their own. This practice operates in tandem with the Quaker understanding of spiritual equality, where no one holds superiority and all are equally worthy of respect and attentive listening.

However, these practices must be grounded in the headship of Christ to experience true unity amid diversity. It is not simply listening and respecting differences

outwardly. Deep spiritual relationships can develop when this listening is exercised under the authority and love of Christ. Building on this foundation of active listening and spiritual equality, practices such as vocal ministry, sharing God's grace and personal experiences, can enrich the spiritual journeys of all members in the small group. Like Quakers experiencing a deeper encounter with God through attentive silence, participants in small groups can cultivate profound relationships with both God and one another, fostering mutual growth and maturity in faith.

Comparatively, Quakerism shares notable similarities with Methodism, an 18th-century Christian movement founded by John Wesley, who emphasized four sources—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—for discerning God's revelation. Whereas early Quakers prioritized personal experience over the Bible, Methodists regarded Scripture as the primary authority. Quakers rejected institutional tradition, while Methodists valued it as a means of understanding God's historical revelation.

Despite these differences, both Quakerism and Methodism recognize the importance of personal experience, treating it neither as mere mysticism nor as rigid dogma. Across the various Quaker traditions, there is a shared emphasis on experiencing God's presence and embracing sacramental living, fostering profound life transformation. In contrast, many contemporary churches focus on structured rituals and elaborate programs, which may inadvertently shift attention away from cultivating deeply transformative, life-changing encounters with God.

The radical practices of early Quakers, however, may encounter resistance in larger church contexts. Their rejection of authority, sacraments, and pastoral leadership could challenge traditional church structures, even though intimacy, equality, and

spiritual freedom are essential for vitality in modern communities. At the same time, it is important to recognize that tradition, doctrinal guidance, and pastoral leadership are not merely obstacles but valuable resources to be integrated thoughtfully.

Early Quaker practices can nevertheless provide meaningful inspiration for small group ministry. By emphasizing spiritual equality and fostering intimate experiences of God's presence, small groups can cultivate transformative moments that strengthen both individual faith and communal growth. In this way, the small group setting holds significant potential for renewal, offering a relational context where deeper connections with God and with one another can flourish.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Pastors play a central role in the life of the faith community, particularly in fostering church growth and sustaining vitality. Congregations often look to pastors to provide clear vision and demonstrate competence in ministry. The growth of churches in the 20th century across various regions illustrates how pastoral leadership can shape the spiritual and organizational vitality of a faith community. Robert Schuller, who led the Crystal Cathedral to significant growth, emphasized that effective leadership is essential for the success of church endeavors. In this light, pastors are called to continually develop and refine their leadership skills. Gary McIntosh identifies ten key pastoral roles, including captain, coach, executive, director, counselor, student, pioneer, conductor, and reporter, reflecting the multifaceted responsibilities necessary to guide a church toward meaningful change.[1]

While pastoral leadership is undeniably important for church growth and development, an overemphasis on pastor-centered structures can present challenges. Such a focus may inadvertently diminish the role of the laity, fostering a dependence on pastors for spiritual guidance and connection with God. Congregants may come to rely on

[1] Gary McIntosh, *The 10 Key Roles of a Pastor: Proven Practices for Balancing the Demands of Leading Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 7.

pastors to mediate their relationship with the Divine, which, even with competent leadership, can limit internal vitality and congregational engagement.

It is paradoxical that many modern Protestant churches, rooted in principles like the Priesthood of All Believers from the Reformation, appear to move away from these foundational ideals. Reformers such as Martin Luther emphasized direct access to God without intermediaries, underscoring the spiritual equality of all believers in Christ. Yet in contemporary practice, pastors often assume roles reminiscent of medieval priests. This shift can restrict congregants' freedom to experience personal transformation and connect with God independently. Moreover, it has contributed to a narrowing of the roles and responsibilities that laypeople are empowered to fulfill within the church.

Hans Küng asserts that the true essence of the church is not defined by its institutional structures, hierarchy, or doctrinal formulations, but by the community of believers committed to serving God and one another.[2] Small groups within churches can often embody the Priesthood of All Believers more fully than larger congregational settings by minimizing hierarchical structures. In these intimate settings, participants are free to share their testimonies, experience direct access to God, and nurture one another, thereby strengthening both their relationship with God and their relationships with each other.

The vibrancy of a church does not primarily depend on how well its organizational structure is designed, but on how effectively spiritual relationships are cultivated among its members in God's presence. The Priesthood of All Believers creates space for individuals to actively participate in their faith, rather than relying solely on

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[2] Küng, *The Church*, 3-4.

pastoral leadership. It allows every member to take on roles traditionally reserved for clergy, connecting people to God, caring for the vulnerable, and fostering community, thereby making these responsibilities personal rather than delegated.

In large congregational worship, attention often centers on the clergy, shaped by the worship space and liturgical structure. Yet within small groups, participants can see and engage with those sitting beside them. Caring for others and walking together in faith becomes not just a pastoral responsibility, but a shared obligation and opportunity for personal spiritual growth.

By inviting congregants to experience intimacy, equality, and responsibility within small groups grounded in the Priesthood of All Believers, the entire church can be revitalized. This model fosters a transformative community where faith is collectively nurtured, relationships with God are deepened, and believers are empowered to support one another in their spiritual journeys.

The Reformation in the 16th century

Papacy Supremacy

During the medieval period, the Catholic Church wielded immense power across Europe, with the pope occupying the pinnacle of authority, often surpassing even secular rulers. This supremacy is vividly illustrated in the conflict between Pope Innocent III and King John I of England. When the Archbishopric of Canterbury became vacant, King John I recommended a candidate, yet Pope Innocent III appointed another of his choosing. In retaliation, King John I seized church properties and expelled priests. In

response, Innocent III placed England under interdict in 1208, suspending all church activities, including Masses and sacraments. Under mounting pressure, King John I returned the church properties, yet remained excommunicated until he finally submitted his loyalty to the pope in order to regain control over his kingdom.[3] This episode highlights the pope's supremacy over secular rulers in medieval Europe.

Tensions between the papacy and secular authorities continued into the 14th century. In 1303, Pope Boniface VIII issued the papal bull Unam Sanctam, asserting the pope's dual authority , both temporal and spiritual, and reinforcing Papal Supremacy.[4] The bull declared the pope as the ultimate arbiter of Church doctrine, even in the face of resistance from secular powers. This document exemplified the hierarchical structure of authority that dominated the medieval church, setting the stage for later challenges that would culminate in the Reformation.

The hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church was closely tied to its historical connection with the Roman Empire, particularly following Christianity's legalization through the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. As the Church grew within the framework of Roman society, it adopted organizational structures that mirrored the hierarchical and bureaucratic systems of the time. Priests assumed central roles in mediating the relationship between believers and God, exercising spiritual authority and guidance. Over time, this hierarchy culminated in placing the pope at the apex, serving as the ultimate

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[3] Ralph V. Turner, *King John* (Stroud, England: The History Press, 2014), 130-133.

[4] Florin Curta and Andrew Holt, *Great Events in Religion* [3 Volumes] (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 626-627.

mediator between God and the faithful, consolidating both spiritual and administrative power within the Church.[5]

Martin Luther and the Reformation

History has repeatedly affirmed the old proverb, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," and the papal supremacy was no exception. This concentration of power contributed significantly to the need for reform within the Catholic Church. Efforts to correct abuses often failed, partly because many leaders in positions of authority benefited personally from the corrupt practices they were meant to reform.

Reformers opposed practices such as absenteeism, pluralism, and simony, whereby leaders held multiple offices for personal gain. Yet, councils and higher authorities frequently resisted relinquishing these privileges. Corruption permeated not only the upper clergy but also lower clergy and monastic orders. Even the rule of celibacy was widely disregarded, with some popes acknowledging illegitimate children.[6] Beyond moral concerns, reform was also needed due to deviations from true faith, such as the sale of indulgences.

Martin Luther, a devout Catholic priest, was deeply troubled by these abuses, particularly the exploitation associated with indulgences. On the eve of All Saints' Day, he posted his Ninety-five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, outlining his

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[5] Stephen Strehle, "The Priesthood of the Believers: Quakers and the Abolition of Slavery," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (October 24, 2023): 1338, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111338, 3.

[6] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 8-10.

criticisms.[7] Luther's aim was not to establish a new religious movement but to reform the Church from within.

The invention of the printing press allowed Luther's ideas to spread rapidly and widely, amplifying his message across Europe. As Justo Gonzalez observes, the Reformation did not occur merely because Luther sought it; rather, historical conditions were ripe, and Luther, along with others, was prepared to fulfill a pivotal role in this transformative movement.[8]

The Priesthood of All Believers

Martin Luther's criticisms of the Catholic Church were deeply rooted in his theological reflections and developed over years of study and spiritual practice. Central to his reformative vision was the concept of the Priesthood of All Believers. As Erna Oliver highlights, this principle rests on three foundational pillars: access, equality, and responsibility.[9]

Access affirms that every individual can approach God directly through Jesus Christ, with no human intermediary required. Equality underscores that all believers stand on the same level before God, dismantling hierarchical distinctions between clergy and laity. Responsibility emphasizes that every believer is called to actively participate in ministry, expressing their faith through service and engagement with the community.

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[7] Samuel Willard Crompton, *Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House, 2004), 32-33.

[8] González, *The Story of Christianity*, 21.

[9] Erna Oliver, "The Unfinished Business of Church History," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42, no. 1 (October 22, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2329, 6.

This theological framework directly challenged the supremacy of the papacy and the priestly monopoly over spiritual mediation. At the same time, it offered a biblical and transformative alternative, enabling all believers to cultivate profound spiritual connections with God and with one another, beyond the constraints of institutional hierarchy.

Personal Access to God

In the medieval Catholic Church, the growing authority of priests was closely tied to their role as mediators between God and the laity. Believers were taught that access to God required priestly intercession. In contrast, the Priesthood of All Believers emphasizes that God's plan does not restrict spiritual authority to a select group; rather, every follower of Christ has direct access to God. Peter affirms this principle in describing believers as "a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9).[10] Through this understanding, all Christians are priests in their own right,[11] removing the necessity of earthly intermediaries for cultivating a personal relationship with God.

This direct access, however, does not imply self-sufficiency. No individual can encounter God independently. Jesus Christ serves as the supreme High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), the divine mediator who reconciles humanity to God through his sacrificial death. The tearing of the temple curtain at his death symbolized the removal of barriers, granting believers the confidence to approach God freely (Hebrews 10:19).

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[10] Marlon C. Robinson, "Shared Leadership: A Rediscovery of an Old Paradigm and its Historical Context," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 12: No. 2, 54-70 (2018), 61.

[11] M. M. Sokupa, "The Priesthood of Believers: Our Proclamation and Practice," *Ministry Magazine* (October, 2017), 16–18.

Central to Luther's theology is the principle of sola fide (faith alone). Luther rejected the notion that human effort or works could earn reconciliation with God, asserting that justification comes solely through faith in Christ and his righteousness.[12] This emphasis on faith alone became a defining cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation, directly challenging the Catholic Church's teachings on indulgences and the requirement of good works for salvation.

Faith in Christ is central to accessing God, as emphasized in Ephesians 2:8: it is "by grace through faith" in Jesus Christ that we are connected to God, not by our own works. This access is mediated not by earthly priests but through Jesus Christ, the High Priest, highlighting the theological foundation for the Priesthood of All Believers. By centering faith in Christ, believers are granted direct access to God, removing the necessity for human intermediaries.

Yet, theological understanding alone does not always guarantee that believers experience a meaningful encounter with God in their daily lives. Reflecting on what faith truly entails can be both significant and practical for deepening spiritual life. Marcus Borg, in The Heart of Christianity, identifies four historically rooted dimensions of faith: assensus (belief), fiducia (trust), fidelitas (fidelity), and visio (a way of seeing).

Faith as assensus, or intellectual agreement, often involves accepting doctrines or affirming religious statements as true. While this dimension has shaped many denominational identities, intellectual assent alone does not necessarily constitute authentic faith.[13] True faith, as Borg suggests, moves beyond mere cognitive agreement,

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[12] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 44.

[13] Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 28-31.

encompassing trust, fidelity, and a transformed way of seeing the world through God's presence. This broader understanding of faith deepens personal access to God, making the principle of the Priesthood of All Believers not just a theological concept but a lived reality in the believer's spiritual journey.

Marcus Borg presents faith as more than intellectual assent, emphasizing its grounding in "matters of the heart."[14] Faith, in his view, encompasses trust, fidelity, and a transformed way of seeing the world, all of which enrich the believer's spiritual experience.

Firstly, faith as trust is likened to floating: when we relax and rely on the "buoyancy of God," we are supported by God's care and guidance. This dimension underscores the importance of resting in God rather than relying solely on personal effort. Secondly, faith as fidelity emphasizes remaining steadfast in our relationship with God. It moves beyond mere doctrinal agreement, highlighting loyalty, commitment, and ongoing devotion to the God revealed through Scripture and lived experience. Lastly, faith as a way of seeing reshapes our perception of reality. Instead of interpreting the world as hostile or indifferent, faith allows us to perceive it as gracious, though not always pleasant, through our connection with God and others.[15] These three dimensions reveal the inherently relational nature of faith: deepening trust in God, maintaining faithfulness in that relationship, and perceiving life through God's perspective.

Jesus encapsulated the essence of faith in two core relationships: first, with God, by "loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

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[14] Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 28.

[15] Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 31-36.

mind"; and second, with others, by "loving your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39). Faith, therefore, is ultimately about loving God and embracing all that God loves,[16] uniting our relationship with God and our engagement with the world.

Faith is not merely intellectual agreement. It is a matter of the heart and is inherently relational. Understanding theological doctrines or religious teachings alone does not constitute full faith if one's heart is not offered to God. Through faith, believers gain access to God, and this access is inseparable from the relationship with Him. Faith and relationship with God are intertwined, each shaping and sustaining the other.

The doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers emphasizes that through faith, anyone can encounter God personally, establishing an intimate, relational connection with Him. This access is not achieved through human effort but is entirely a gift of God's grace. Ultimately, the Priesthood of All Believers opens a personal connection to God through Christ, the High Priest, without the mediation of earthly priests. Faith enables this access, underscoring the necessity of a personal encounter with Christ.

However, if believers view faith merely as intellectual assent, agreeing with doctrines without relational engagement, they miss its essential relational dimension. The Priesthood of All Believers does not simply aim to diminish the role of priests as mediators; rather, it encourages every believer to actively and relationally connect with God through Christ, fostering a dynamic and transformative faith experience.

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[16] Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 40-41.

Equality before God

The Priesthood of All Believers challenges hierarchical structures that grant spiritual authority to a select few, emphasizing that all believers stand equally before God. Martin Luther affirmed this principle, stating, "There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status …"[17] Luther underscored the equality of all believers before God while acknowledging functional distinctions necessary for the life of the faith community.

Leadership roles such as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11, NRSV) remain important, but they should function within a framework that recognizes the equal access of all believers to God. A major barrier to equality is the terminology itself, "clergy" and "layperson." Historically, the term "layperson" distinguished the congregation from priests, often implying inferior education or status. In contrast, clergy were typically well-educated and institutionally trained. Such distinctions reinforced structural inequality within the church.

By reclaiming all believers, including clergy and laity, as the "laos," the people of God,[18] this approach affirms that functional roles do not imply spiritual superiority. Equality before God exists alongside diverse functions, allowing leadership to serve the community without undermining the equal dignity and access of every believer.

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[17] Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations Sourcebook*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 35.

[18] Mark Maddix, "A Biblical Model of the People of God: Overcoming the Clergy/Laity Dichotomy," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 6, no. 2 (November 2009): 214–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/073989130900600203, 215.

Although the Protestant Church embraced the Priesthood of All Believers, clergy often remained in positional roles within a hierarchical structure rather than functioning purely in their intended roles. This environment inadvertently suggested that clergy were somehow superior to the laity, granting them primary authority to speak God's Word. In contrast, traditional Quakers practiced their faith in a radically egalitarian manner, removing clergy from their worship gatherings. They emphasized that the teachings of Christ and the gospel affirm the dignity and equality of all people. This principle influenced both their worship and communal life.[19]

Within the community, Quakers eliminated the clergy's exclusive role in delivering God's Word. Quaker Worship was open to anyone moved by the Spirit to share the message they received. While leadership functions remain necessary in any church, Quakers demonstrated that equality of access to God could coexist with these functions, showing how egalitarian principles could operate in practice within a faith community.

This understanding of equality translates naturally into small group settings. Just as clergy share God's Word in corporate worship, all participants in a small group can be given space to freely share the grace they have received and recount their spiritual journeys. This is not simply storytelling. It is the sharing of God's active presence in their lives. Recognizing that all believers share in the priesthood fosters an environment where faith-related stories are not limited to a select few but can be expressed and explored by everyone, encouraging deeper engagement.

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[19] Strehle, "The Priesthood of the Believers," 6.

Equality before God broadens inclusivity in the church, keeping the doors open for anyone to actively participate in worship and ministry, fostering shared leadership. At the same time, this principle does not negate the function of clergy; rather, it reframes their role so that it serves the community without implying hierarchical superiority.

Responsibility to Each Other

When authority is concentrated in the hands of a few, such as clergy, it can inadvertently lead the congregation to become passive in ministry and in their own faith journey. Members may defer their responsibilities to clergy, limiting their active engagement. In the body of Christ, each member is an integral part, uniquely designed to support the connection and growth of the whole. Each part has a specific function that cannot simply be transferred to another. When one part fails to fulfill its role, the entire body suffers. The more responsibilities are delegated solely to clergy, the weaker the faith community becomes, even if its numbers appear to grow.

The priestly role of each believer within the body of Christ encompasses two central aspects: proclaiming the wondrous deeds of Christ and sharing leadership responsibilities among fellow believers.[20] In many contemporary churches, these functions are often assigned primarily to clergy. Yet, the Priesthood of All Believers emphasizes that these roles belong to all members, encouraging the congregation to actively proclaim the gospel and care for one another. This approach fosters meaningful connections and shared responsibility within the faith community.

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[20] Robinson, "Shared Leadership," 61.

Each believer is endowed with spiritual gifts meant to benefit both the church and society. John Driver observes that the church truly embodies the body of Christ when it acknowledges and actively employs all gifts of the Holy Spirit within the community.[21] The Spirit equips each believer to contribute to the maturity and growth of the body of Christ. By embracing the Priesthood of All Believers, congregants are empowered to actively use their gifts rather than passively delegating their responsibilities to clergy, ensuring the health and vitality of the entire faith community.

Ephesians 4:11-16 emphasizes that not all believers share the same functions or gifts. This diversity, while a strength, can also pose challenges, potentially highlighting personal preferences or fostering individualism that risks dividing the church. Yet, the metaphor of the body of Christ provides a framework for understanding how these distinct gifts are both unique and interdependent. Each gift contributes to the building up of the body, promoting "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Ephesians 4:13).

Though each member has a distinct function, all remain connected under the head, Christ, ensuring that diversity does not fracture but rather strengthens the community. The principle of equality before God further empowers all believers to participate actively in ministry, recognizing that their unique gifts are essential for the growth and health of the whole. This perspective reinforces both shared responsibility and interconnectedness, nurturing a faith community where unity and diversity coexist harmoniously under Christ's headship.

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[21] George Lotter and Timothy Van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers in Ephesians 4:1–16 and Its Relevance for the Missio Dei and a Biblical Missional Ecumenism," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 51, no. 2 (February 28, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i2.2251, 2.

As believers exercise the gifts given by the Holy Spirit, diversity within the church is inevitable. The Spirit distributes distinct gifts for distinct purposes, yet this diversity is not a source of division. Martin Luther emphasizes the functional responsibility of each member, highlighting that unity is maintained when every believer actively participates in the life of the body:

> Every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike . . . The priesthood of believers means that we stand before God, pray for others, intercede with and sacrifice ourselves to God and proclaim the Word to one another. (Martin Luther, *Letter to the Christian Nobility*) [22]

All believers possess unique roles and functions, yet they remain unified under the headship of Christ. Greg Ogden's Organism Model envisions the church as a living body, where authority is decentralized under Christ as the active Head.[23] In this model, ministries develop organically, and every contribution, regardless of formal office, is essential to the health of the body. Believers do not need to rely solely on clergy to employ their God-given gifts; rather, each member can participate in building up the body of Christ, provided all roles operate in unity under Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of living together in Christ clearly outlines the responsibilities believers have toward one another. First, we are called to listen attentively. Just as our love for God begins with listening to His Word, our love for fellow believers begins with learning to hear them. Second, we are called to actively help one another within the Christian community, offering practical support and

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[22] Wim A. Dreyer, "The Priesthood of Believers: The Forgotten Legacy of the Reformation," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (October 19, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6021, 3.

[23] Maddix, "A Biblical Model of the People of God," 221.

encouragement. Third, our responsibility includes bearing with one another, enduring alongside each other and offering strength in times of struggle.[24] Bonhoeffer emphasizes that believers are not isolated individuals within the body of Christ; rather, they are interconnected, living together and supporting one another in faith.

The church must return to being a community where all members actively care for one another in Christ. This includes identifying, nurturing, and utilizing each person's gifts and ministries, fostering transformation and renewal within the faith community.[25] Restoring the responsibility of all believers goes beyond merely performing assigned roles. It means that each member becomes someone else's priest. In this mutual priesthood, every believer participates in caring for one another, promoting spiritual growth, and supporting each other's journey in Christ. When all believers act as priests to one another, the church embodies a vibrant, relational community marked by shared responsibility, interdependence, and collective growth in faith.

How The Priesthood of All Believers Works in Small Groups

Contemporary Christianity offers a variety of small group formats. Kevin Watson categorizes them as affinity groups, which form around shared passions or interests; common curriculum groups, which focus on imparting information; and transformation-driven groups, modeled after John Wesley's class meetings.[26] While all small groups can

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[24] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1954), 97-103.

[25] George Lotter and Timothy Van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers in Ephesians 4:1–16 and Its Relevance for the Missio Dei and a Biblical Missional Ecumenism," 3.

[26] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 5-6.

provide valuable learning experiences and foster fellowship, not all create environments that lead to life-changing encounters with Christ. What distinguishes transformative small groups is their emphasis on personal connection, accountability, and spiritual growth.

Early Methodists regularly gathered in small class meetings, typically held in homes with around ten participants. These meetings centered on a guiding question, such as, "How is your relationship with God?"[27] Adapted from inquiries about one's soul, this focus emphasized personal engagement with God and sharing experiences of His grace in everyday life. Within these gatherings, all participants were encouraged to share the struggles of their faith journey as well as the ways they had experienced God's blessings. Everyone had open access to contribute, reflecting the principle that all believers have direct access to God. Sharing in this manner created a supportive environment where participants were heard, encouraged, and spiritually strengthened, demonstrating the Priesthood of All Believers in practice.

For small groups to foster genuine life transformation, it is essential that participants cultivate a close connection with God not only during meetings but also throughout their daily lives. This approach emphasizes being attentive to how one walks with God in everyday contexts, ensuring that the relationship with God extends beyond the group setting and permeates all aspects of life.

Such a foundation allows participants to share their struggles and successes authentically, grounded in their personal relationship with God. Hierarchical structures, by contrast, often concentrate opportunities for genuine sharing in the hands of a few, such as pastors or leaders. In a setting where all individuals have equal access to God,

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[27] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 25.

however, everyone is empowered to contribute their insights and experiences, enriching the group with diverse perspectives from their own faith journeys.

Within this free and egalitarian environment, a variety of questions and answers naturally emerge, fostering openness, support, and meaningful dialogue among members. No one is overlooked or dismissed based on social status, education, or background, because all are equally capable of connecting with God and offering contributions that build up the community. By emphasizing equality in access to God, small groups cultivate an atmosphere of genuine sharing and mutual care, creating opportunities for profound transformation both in individual lives and in the broader faith community.

Small groups offer a unique context for fostering deep interconnections, allowing participants to grow closer not only to God but also to one another. Their smaller size creates space for meaningful care, authentic sharing, and a sense of vibrant community. Yet, these deep relationships do not emerge automatically. They require intentional effort, attentiveness, and genuine engagement, moving beyond surface-level interactions into a shared spiritual journey. John Wesley emphasized this principle in his Class Meetings, describing it as "watching over one another in love." He encouraged early Methodists to enter into each other's lives and engage deeply, fostering mutual growth and connection through love.[28]

Within small groups, these close relationships operate both horizontally and vertically, between members and with God. The Priesthood of All Believers empowers each participant to grow spiritually in Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,

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[28] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 26.

bringing individuals closer to God and to one another.[29] In this context, group members embody a priestly role toward one another, embracing the responsibility to support, nurture, and care for the entire body of Christ.

Transformation-driven small groups exemplify the practice of the Priesthood of All Believers by creating a space where participants can experience personal access to God, equality before God, and mutual responsibility. At the same time, it is vital to maintain connection with the broader church community, ensuring theological guidance, accountability, and support. As Mark Maddix emphasizes, the larger church provides a framework for theological reflection and development, enriching the spiritual growth of individuals while enhancing the vitality of both the small group and the wider faith community.[30]

Conclusion

The decline in church vitality often stems from congregants becoming passive, placing excessive reliance on pastors. Such dependency is reinforced by hierarchical structures that elevate clergy above the laity, which can dampen enthusiasm and hinder active participation within the congregation. Instead of cultivating personal connections with God, pursuing transformation in Christ, and supporting one another within the body of Christ, many members settle for passive involvement in pastor-led worship and ministries. This absence of daily, personal engagement with God can foster individualism, weakening the bonds among believers.

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[29] Robinson, "Shared Leadership," 61.

[30] Maddix, "A Biblical Model of the People of God," 222.

The concept of the Priesthood of All Believers addresses these challenges by emphasizing each believer's direct access to God through Christ, without dependence on earthly intermediaries. Faith in Christ is central to this access, as no one can encounter God through personal effort alone; all rely on Jesus Christ as the High Priest. Faith is not merely intellectual assent to Scripture or doctrine. It is a relational journey characterized by trust, fidelity, and a transformed perspective on the world. This journey encompasses both a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal companionship with fellow believers, grounding the believer's life in connection and mutual responsibility.

Central to the Priesthood of All Believers is the recognition that every Christian has equal access to God. While functional roles exist to support the body of Christ, these roles do not establish hierarchical superiority. Historically, the terms "clergy" and "layperson" have carried implications that inadvertently fostered perceptions of inferiority or privilege. Early Quakers challenged this by removing clergy from worship, creating space for anyone to share insights and experiences from God. In contemporary church settings, such radical application may not always be practical. However, the principle remains particularly valuable in small group contexts. Here, all believers are encouraged to participate actively in encountering God and freely share their faith journeys.

Within the faith community, each believer assumes a priestly role for one another, embracing the responsibility to support, care for, and nurture fellow members of the body of Christ. Although individuals have distinct functions, roles, and spiritual gifts, these differences work together to build up the body of Christ, fostering spiritual maturity in a

network of interdependent relationships. This unity is rooted in diversity, with every believer contributing to the collective growth under the headship of Jesus Christ.

The application of the Priesthood of All Believers is especially transformative in small group settings, where participants can personally access God, share their spiritual journeys, and take responsibility for one another's care. In these groups, believers enact the principles emphasized by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: attentive listening, active help, and enduring support. When each member recognizes and fulfills their responsibility to care for others, the spiritual relationships within the group deepen, fostering a vibrant and dynamic community. This vitality naturally radiates beyond the small group, enriching the broader church environment.

At Ivy Creek UMC, every believer is called to embrace the role of a priest, enjoying equal access to God and sharing the responsibility to nurture one another's spiritual growth. Small group gatherings that prioritize equality and mutual responsibility provide a setting where deep connections with God and fellow believers can flourish. Those who experience transformation within these groups carry renewed energy and passion into the larger congregation, embodying the intimacy, equality, and shared responsibility central to the Priesthood of All Believers.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

This chapter will explore Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory to understand how relationships contribute to differentiation of self within family systems. The eight core concepts of Bowen's theory will be introduced to demonstrate the interdependent nature of family dynamics. Building on this foundation, I will integrate and expand these insights alongside the biblical, historical, and theological foundations established in earlier chapters.

Family Systems Theory intersects meaningfully with the Biblical Foundations outlined in Ephesians 4:11-16, which emphasize diversity, unity, and maturity in the Body of Christ. Just as each member of the body of Christ has unique roles that contribute to collective unity, each family member functions within a family system in ways that support or challenge the growth of others. In small groups, this principle manifests as collective maturity, where each person's development and faithful participation contribute to the health and progress of the entire group. In this way, understanding interconnections within systems helps clarify how individual growth fosters vitality and maturity within the broader faith community.

In my Historical Foundations, I examined Quakerism, which emphasizes intimacy, spiritual equality, and freedom in worship, offering practical insights for small group ministry. Quakers prioritize direct encounters with God and encourage equality in

worship, allowing every participant to share without hierarchy. No one holds a superior or inferior position in personally encountering God, creating a foundation where each individual's faith journey and contributions are respected. This principle is often practiced through active listening, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued. Understanding how relationships develop within a family system provides a useful lens to explore how difference and respect shape relational dynamics in faith communities.

Similarly, the Priesthood of All Believers, as discussed in my Theological Foundations, emphasizes that the responsibility to proclaim God's Word and care for one another is not reserved for a few leaders but extends to all Christians. In parallel, differentiation of self within a family system moves members from dependence on hierarchical authority to autonomy, maintaining interconnections while cultivating healthy independence.

Although spiritual growth and faith are often seen as individual pursuits, this perspective can be limited if the church loses its relational vitality. Personal holiness remains important, but in today's diverse and interconnected world, individuals influence and are influenced by one another. Relationships formed within families or small groups are dynamic and bidirectional, shaping both personal and communal growth. Understanding these relational dynamics offers meaningful insights into individual development while highlighting the critical role of relationships within small group communities.

Systems Theory provides a lens through which parts are understood as interconnected components of a larger whole rather than isolated entities. Each part plays a distinctive role within the system, influencing and being influenced by the other parts.

Without acknowledging these interconnections, it is difficult to grasp the full nature of both individual elements and the system as a whole.

Family Systems Theory, a branch of Systems Theory, applies this perspective to families, viewing them as interconnected systems. Individuals within a family influence one another's development of self, positively or negatively. Family units typically consist of a small number of members in ongoing relationships, mirroring the dynamics of small groups. This similarity allows Family Systems Theory to illuminate the workings of small group settings, where each member contributes to the growth and transformation of others within the group. Understanding these interconnections provides insight into how relationships shape individual and collective development.

Family Systems Theory helps us move beyond viewing members of a family or small group as isolated individuals, allowing us to see how they are interconnected. Through this lens, we can understand the roles each person plays, whether consciously recognized or not, and how relationships among members influence the dynamics of the small group. This perspective highlights the significance of these interactions, showing how each connection contributes to the group's overall health and function. Furthermore, it reveals how small groups, through these interconnected relationships, play a vital role in fostering vibrancy and vitality within the larger church community.

Family Systems Theory

Early pioneers of family therapy often focused on individual members to address dysfunction, seeking solutions by analyzing personal behaviors and traits. While this

approach provided insights into individual challenges, it frequently overlooked the interconnected nature of family life.

Murray Bowen expanded this perspective by examining how both current family dynamics and patterns from previous generations influence individual behavior. One key tool in Bowenian therapy is the genogram, which maps three generations of family history to identify recurring patterns and influences that may affect present and future family members. This method emphasizes that individuals cannot be fully understood in isolation but must be seen in the context of their family system. Family Systems Theory views the family as an interconnected system rather than a collection of separate individuals.[1] Unlike approaches that focus solely on the individual, this theory highlights the relationships, interactions, and reciprocal influences among family members. By understanding these connections, Bowenian therapists can better appreciate how family dynamics shape personal behavior and relational patterns, providing a more holistic framework for addressing both individual and systemic issues.

Murray Bowen observed that individuals often respond in dysfunctional ways when unresolved attachments exist within the family system.[2] Early in his clinical work, he focused on the mother-child attachment, proposing that strong, unresolved emotional bonds, particularly between a child and mother, could contribute to later difficulties such as schizophrenia.[3] Bowen drew a parallel between emotional attachment and biological attachment, suggesting that both exert powerful influences on development. His insight

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[1] Bethany C. Suppes, *Family Systems Theory Simplified* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 177.

[2] Daniel Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), 37.

[3] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 37-38.

shifted attention from viewing the child as the sole source of dysfunction to considering the relational patterns between family members as a key factor.

Family Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding how people think, interact socially, and manage emotions within their families and society.[4] Within a family system, two opposing forces shape individual development: a togetherness force, which draws members closer, and an individuation force, which encourages autonomy.[5] When these forces are balanced, individuals achieve a healthy differentiation of self. Imbalances, such as excessive fusion, can result in emotional and relational dysfunction.

By highlighting these dynamics, Bowen Family Systems Theory illustrates how individuals function interdependently within a system. Emotions circulate and influence behaviors across the family, shaping both individual and collective outcomes. Therapists using this model help individuals increase self-awareness, improve differentiation of self, navigate relational patterns, and cultivate healthier connections within their families and broader social contexts.

Anxiety, Reactivity, and Patterns

In Bowen's framework, anxiety is defined as "the response of an organism to a threat, real or imagined."[6] Within a family system, individuals cannot escape anxiety. It is a shared emotional experience that circulates among family members and influences the

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[4] Stephen Strehle, "The Priesthood of the Believers: Quakers and the Abolition of Slavery," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (October 24, 2023): 1338, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111338, 502.

[5] Catherine M. Rakow, *Making Sense of Human Life: Murray Bowen's Determined Effort toward Family Systems Theory* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 91.

[6] Jenny Brown and Lauren Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry* (Neutral Bay, New South Wales, Australia: The Family Systems Practice & Institute, 2019), 74.

functioning of the system as a whole. Anxiety is not isolated to one person but is transmitted across relationships, shaping behaviors and interactions.

Bowen distinguished between psychosis and neurosis as differences of degree rather than kind. Both involve similar emotional processes, with the key distinction being the level of functional impairment experienced by the individual.[7] This perspective emphasizes that dysfunctional behaviors within a family system are often the result of heightened anxiety, rather than fundamentally different causes. Elevated anxiety can hinder the process of differentiating oneself, preventing individuals from achieving healthy autonomy within the system.

In Bowenian therapy, two primary goals emerge: reducing anxiety levels within the family system and enhancing differentiation of self among individuals. Anxiety manifests in two main forms: acute and chronic.[8] Acute anxiety is short-term and typically manageable, allowing individuals to recover without lasting impact. Chronic anxiety, however, persists over time within relationships, creating long-lasting effects similar to the difference between short-term and long-term memory. Just as long-term memories shape our perceptions and behaviors, chronic anxiety becomes deeply ingrained, influencing relational patterns and individual functioning.

By understanding how anxiety operates and is transmitted within family systems, Bowen's theory provides insight into the interconnectedness of individuals and the mechanisms that sustain both dysfunction and potential growth within relational networks.

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[7] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 40.

[8] Roberta Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* (Pompano Beach, FL: Leading Systems, 2018), 7.

Chronic anxiety within a family system can give rise to established patterns in which individuals respond automatically and emotionally, often without conscious thought. These reactive responses, driven by emotion, make it possible to predict behavior because individuals tend to respond consistently in the same manner. Bowen identified four common patterns: triangling, conflict, distance, and over-functioning/under-functioning reciprocity.[9]

Triangling occurs when more than two people are involved in a situation, often increasing anxiety, particularly for vulnerable individuals such as children. Conflict manifests through serious criticism or ongoing disagreements within the family. Distance is characterized by emotional disconnection. Individuals may believe that avoiding one another resolves the conflict, but underlying issues remain unaddressed. Over-functioning/under-functioning reciprocity refers to imbalanced relationships, where one person consistently dominates or takes responsibility while the other underperforms, creating unequal dynamics within the system.[10]

Bowen emphasized that if any individual involved changes how they manage their role in the relationship, the dysfunctional pattern itself is likely to dissolve. Identifying which patterns are operating within habitual dysfunction is essential for effectively addressing and resolving relational issues.

In family systems, anxiety in relationships interacts closely with the concepts of togetherness, individuation, fusion, and differentiation of self. When anxiety levels are high, the desire for togetherness and fusion increases, while individuation and

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[9] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 11-12.

[10] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 22.

differentiation of self tend to decrease. Conversely, when anxiety is lower, individuation and differentiation of self are more easily maintained, but the emphasis on togetherness and fusion may lessen. Therefore, managing anxiety and enhancing differentiation of self are essential for individuals to function effectively within the family system. Differentiation of self does not imply separation from the family but involves maintaining one's functional roles while staying emotionally connected to others.

The family is understood as an emotional unit. Anxiety and tension are not merely individual experiences but are shared across the family, forming an interdependent emotional dynamic.[11] Each person's anxieties influence and are influenced by the functioning of other members within the family system.

The Eight Concepts of Bowen Family System Theory

Bowen developed eight concepts to explain how individuals are influenced by their relational experiences within the family: Differentiation of Self, Triangles, Nuclear Family Emotional System, Family Projection Process, Multigenerational Transmission Process, Sibling Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Emotional Process in Society. These concepts examine the dynamics of family systems and how they shape individual behaviors and emotions.

The first concept, Differentiation of Self, is fundamental for understanding how families function as emotional units. "Emotional" refers to the internal pressures or forces present within individuals and in the interactions between family members.[12] Emotional

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[11] Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 12.

[12] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 45.

systems often drive automatic reactions to others and the environment. Differentiation of self refers to an individual's ability to manage these emotional reactions.[13] Individuals who are less differentiated tend to experience higher levels of anxiety from their environment and may project this anxiety onto others.

In Family Systems Theory, differentiation of self is assessed by examining the balance between individuation and togetherness. Higher levels of differentiation indicate a more balanced approach, whereas lower levels often lean heavily toward togetherness.[14] Most studies on differentiation of self have focused on Caucasian populations in the United States. However, cultural factors can significantly influence how individuation and togetherness interact. For example, in South Korea, where cultural norms emphasize togetherness, research has found that high levels of fusion and differentiation of self can coexist, contributing to improved family functioning.[15] Therefore, cultural context is essential when interpreting differentiation of self, as higher differentiation does not universally guarantee healthier individual or family functioning.

The second concept in Bowen Family Systems Theory is Triangles, which Bowen described as "the smallest stable unit" within a family system.[16] Anxiety and tension in relationships often emerge when individuals attempt to balance conflicting needs. One way to relieve this tension is by involving a third person from the family, forming a

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[13] Dilay Süloğlu and Çiğdem Güler, "Predicting Perceived Stress and Resilience: The Role of Differentiation of Self," *Current Issues in Personality Psychology* 9, no. 4 (May 17, 2021): 289–98, https://doi.org/10.5114/cipp.2021.106140, 291.

[14] Daniel Papero et al., "Natural Systems Thinking and the Human Family," *Systems* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2018): 19, https://doi.org/10.3390/systems6020019, 4.

[15] Suppes, *Family Systems Theory Simplified*, 102.

[16] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 47.

triangle. The intensity and stability of this triangular relationship are influenced by the level of differentiation of self. For instance, in marital conflicts, a child may become drawn into the unstable emotional dynamics between the couple, creating a triangulated relationship. The lower the differentiation of self, the more entrenched and persistent this triangular dynamic becomes, potentially resulting in dysfunction for the child involved.

The third concept is the Nuclear Family Emotional System, which examines recurring emotional patterns within a family, especially when differentiation is low and emotional fusion is high. When a nuclear family is formed, such as through marriage, each spouse brings their level of differentiation, often shaped by their own parental families.[17] In families with lower differentiation, one spouse may dominate emotionally, causing the other to adapt by increasing emotional fusion. Conversely, couples with higher levels of differentiation experience less fusion and greater emotional stability. These patterns, established before marriage, often persist and are transmitted across generations, as individuals unconsciously replicate the emotional dynamics they experienced in their family of origin within their own important relationships.

The fourth concept in Bowen Family Systems Theory is the Family Projection Process. This concept examines how parents transmit their level of differentiation to their children, affecting each child differently within the family.[18] Unlike general parenting, projection is an anxiety-driven process. Children who are most affected are typically those with the strongest emotional attachment to their parents and the lowest level of differentiation of self.

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[17] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 51.

[18] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 66.

The primary role in this process often falls on the mother, who both gives birth to and raises the child.[19] Projection begins with the mother's anxiety, which the child then mirrors, often unconsciously. The mother may interpret the resulting emotional responses as solely the child's problem. Mothers who are aware of this dynamic may respond with excessive empathy and worry, becoming overprotective. While this may temporarily reduce the mother's anxiety, it can create emotional challenges for the child, shaping their development and future functioning within the family system.

The fifth concept in Bowen Family Systems Theory is the Multigenerational Transmission Process. This concept builds on the Family Projection Process, explaining that a child's level of differentiation of self is shaped not only by the current generation but also by patterns transmitted across multiple generations.[20] Over time, families tend to select spouses with similar levels of differentiation and unconsciously project anxieties onto their children. This dynamic can result in lower levels of differentiation in subsequent generations, creating a multigenerational chain in which all family members function as both actors and responders. Bowen emphasizes that understanding these intergenerational relationships, ideally across at least three generations, is crucial.[21] Mapping these patterns provides valuable insight and can serve as a shortcut for effective therapeutic intervention.

The sixth concept in Bowen Family Systems Theory is sibling position, which builds on Walter Toman's work, Family Constellation. Bowen integrated Toman's

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[19] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 58.

[20] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 60.

[21] Suppes, *Family Systems Theory Simplified*, 57.

insights to explain how children's characteristics and behaviors develop consistently based on their birth order within the family.[22] Each sibling's personality is influenced by their ordinal position,[23] as well as by factors such as the family projection process and the level of differentiation of self. Understanding sibling position helps to explain patterns of behavior and relational dynamics within the family system.

The seventh concept is emotional cutoff, which describes how individuals attempt to manage unresolved emotional attachments to their parents or other significant family members. Emotional cutoff can take various forms, such as physically distancing oneself, emotionally isolating while living together, avoiding communication, or disregarding the values of family members.[24] While cutoff may temporarily reduce anxiety, it can increase sensitivity to strong emotions in present relationships and limit the individual's ability to function effectively within relational systems.

The eighth concept is the emotional process in society, which extends Bowen's theory beyond the family to include societal dynamics. Bowen observed that emotional processes in society mirror those within families. As societal anxiety rises, problems become more visible, and individuals in positions of authority, such as public officials, may react similarly to anxious family members. Increased anxiety can cause them to lose focus on core values or principles when managing complex situations or interpersonal challenges.[25]

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[22] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 85.

[23] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 62.

[24] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 62-23.

[25] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 64

Foundations and Family Systems Theory

In this chapter, I explore how Family Systems Theory both shapes and expands my biblical, historical, and theological foundations. By integrating these principles with Scripture, historical context, and theological frameworks, I aim to provide a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of individuals and groups within Christian faith communities.

Bowen Family Systems Theory offers a lens for understanding how individuals function within relational systems, highlighting concepts such as differentiation of self, fusion, anxiety, reactivity, and relational patterns. These principles of interconnectedness are particularly useful for analyzing small group dynamics, as they illuminate how each member's behavior, emotions, and decisions influence and are influenced by others. Applying these insights helps clarify how small groups can cultivate spiritual growth, mutual support, and transformation within the broader body of Christ.

Interaction of Family Systems Theory with the Biblical Foundations

The biblical foundation of my DMin project is grounded in Ephesians 4:11-16, where the church in Ephesus faced challenges including diverse backgrounds among its members, divisions within the congregation, and immature Christian living. The writer of Ephesians offers profound guidance for addressing these challenges, emphasizing unity, mutual support, and spiritual growth. Viewed through the lens of Family Systems Theory, these challenges can be interpreted as signs of low differentiation among individuals, which manifest as anxiety within the relational system of the church.

Ephesians emphasizes unity not as a suppression of individual distinctions, but as a dynamic integration of diverse members in a way that strengthens the body of Christ. While unity is crucial for the sustainability of small groups, it is often misunderstood as merging identities or minimizing differences. In contrast, the unity described in Ephesians preserves individuality while promoting active engagement in Christ.[26] Differences in background, culture, or social status are not sources of division; rather, they enrich the church when embraced in a Christ-centered community.

Similarly, the concept of differentiation of self in Family Systems Theory does not imply separation from the group. Instead, it involves developing a distinct identity while remaining relationally connected, allowing individuals to grow into maturity in Christ. This process of transformation aligns with Paul's vision of achieving "unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God" and attaining "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Through this integrated perspective, small group members can both honor their unique identities and contribute to the collective spiritual growth of the faith community.

Ephesians uses the powerful metaphor of the body of Christ to illustrate unity, where the church represents the body and Christ serves as the head. Just as a body consists of various organs and parts, each fulfilling unique roles and interconnected with one another, the effective functioning of the whole relies on each part performing its role in connection with the others. Each part carries out its responsibilities, but it is only when the parts are relationally connected within the body of Christ that both the individual parts and the whole body exhibit health and vitality. In this way, the interconnections

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[26] Ballenger, "Ephesians 4:1–16," 294.

among members and their relationship to the head, Christ, are crucial for building a thriving and balanced body, rather than each part functioning in isolation.

Family Systems Theory naturally complements this biblical metaphor by providing a framework for understanding interconnected systems. Just as individuals in a family influence and are influenced by one another,[27] each member of the church impacts others through their participation and relational dynamics. Recognizing and valuing the contributions of every member enhances the overall health of the body, fostering a vibrant, interconnected, and spiritually mature faith community.

The term "differentiation" draws from biology, suggesting a parallel to cellular development. Just as cells differentiate to carry out distinct yet interconnected functions within an organism, members within a group or church body have unique roles that are interdependent.[28] Interactions among these parts can create tension due to interpersonal anxiety and stress, which is often mirrored in small group settings where conflicts and anxieties may arise.[29] In Family Systems Theory, the concept of triangles describes how introducing a third party can help ease relational tension. Similarly, in small groups, recognizing Christ's Lordship provides a divine reference point for resolving conflicts. Christ is not simply a neutral third party but the head of the entire body, guiding and uniting all parts.

Exploring Ephesians 4:11-16 alongside Family Systems Theory deepens our understanding of the challenges faced by the Ephesian church and their relevance to

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[27] Brown and Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry*, 17.

[28] Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 47.

[29] Papero et al., "Natural Systems Thinking and the Human Family," 4.

contemporary Christian communities. The epistle's emphasis on unity, interconnection, and spiritual growth aligns closely with the principles of differentiation and relational interconnectedness in Family Systems Theory. Differentiating oneself within a church context provides a framework to address anxiety, conflicts, and divisions, encouraging members to grow more Christ-like while maintaining their unique identity. By embracing diversity, practicing humility, and fostering unity, small groups cultivate closer connections with God and one another, enabling both individual transformation and communal flourishing. In this way, they become a living representation of the body of Christ, dynamic, interconnected, and spiritually vibrant in the world.

Interaction of Family Systems Theory with the Historical Foundations

Quakerism forms the historical foundation of my DMin project regarding small group ministry. Quakers practice Christianity in ways that differ significantly from other denominations, emphasizing inward encounters with God through silence, spiritual equality, the rejection of rituals and sacraments, and a strong commitment to peace. These distinctive traits provide valuable insights for understanding how small groups can foster meaningful connections with God and nurture relational bonds among members of the faith community.

Experiencing God's presence in Quaker worship is rooted in each individual's personal relationship with God. While gathering corporately, participants wait in silence for God's guidance. This silence is not passive stillness but an active attentiveness, an engaged listening to God. In this process, each person maintains differentiation, preserving their unique relationship with God while participating in the communal

worship experience. This balance between personal spiritual identity and communal engagement mirrors the principles of Family Systems Theory, highlighting how individuals remain distinct yet interconnected within a faith community.

According to Family Systems Theory, every person seeks a balance between independence and connection to others, which is referred to as their level of differentiation.[30] Each family member has the potential to develop a strong sense of self, maintaining their unique identity while cultivating close relationships within their immediate and extended family. Individuals with healthy self-differentiation can stand out as distinct persons while remaining fully connected to others.[31] In the context of small groups, a high level of self-differentiation is essential for fostering deep intimacy with God. It allows participants to engage authentically, preventing them from hiding behind group dynamics and encouraging genuine personal encounters with God.

One aspect of Quakerism that has raised concerns among traditional Christian denominations is its rejection of outward structures, such as sacraments, in favor of inward experiences with God. While this inward focus emphasizes personal encounters with the divine, it can be perceived as a disconnection from tradition and heritage, elements often viewed as human-made yet influential over generations. Family Systems Theory offers valuable insight here, showing how spiritual beliefs and experiences are shaped by the faith community and the emotional connections passed down across generations. Christian traditions, including sacraments, have influenced our faith and understanding of Christianity over time. Even if we are not consciously aware of this

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[30] Suppes, *Family Systems Theory Simplified*, 170.

[31] Maddix, "A Biblical Model of the People of God," 3.

influence, we cannot fully separate our present faith from these historical and communal foundations. In this sense, applying Family Systems Theory encourages believers to appreciate the historical and traditional dimensions of their faith communities, helping them gain a clearer understanding of their current spiritual identity and practice.

An individual's faith journey is deeply influenced by family dynamics. Bowen's insights emphasize that emotional bonds and relational patterns within families shape our perspectives on spirituality and how we engage with God and others. By openly exploring these connections, individuals can trace the development of their beliefs, gain self-understanding, and better appreciate the experiences of others. Such reflection fosters meaningful insights and strengthens the sense of community within a small group setting.

In Quakerism, silence is not merely the absence of noise but a deliberate posture of attentiveness, calmness, and expectation for God's presence. Worship and meetings provide space for participants to encounter God through active listening. Within family systems, active listening functions as a form of respect and acknowledgment toward others, influencing relationships in various ways. Likewise, in small groups, listening attentively to one another extends beyond hearing words. It becomes a conduit for forming deep spiritual bonds. Approaching silence as active listening, which honors and values others, enhances both one's relationship with God and the interconnected relationships within the group.

In Family Systems Theory, individuals within a family both influence and are influenced by emotions, language, and behavior. Silence can serve as a method of expressing emotions, whether positively or negatively. It can create distance from other family members to reduce anxiety or signify agreement and togetherness. Within the

family system, silence is a powerful way of influencing others beyond words and actions.[32]

In Quakerism, silence is valued as a medium for experiencing the presence of God rather than an end in itself. It conveys meaning beyond language or behavior. In a small group setting, moments of silence during prayer can be as impactful as sharing one's personal life experiences. Sharing and listening through silence become tools that tangibly connect participants to one another.

Close relationships are central to Christian small groups, both vertically with God and horizontally with one another. Quaker practices highlight the development of a personal relationship with God through attentiveness to God's presence. Yet, the collective relational dynamics emphasized in Family Systems Theory complement this individual focus. Just as family members influence and are influenced by one another, individuals in small groups shape and are shaped by their relationships within the group. In small groups, these interconnected relationships create spiritual dynamics that cannot be replicated in larger congregational settings, fostering both intimacy with God and meaningful bonds among participants.

Interaction of Family Systems Theory with the Theological Foundations

The theological foundation of my DMin project is rooted in the Priesthood of All Believers, emphasizing direct access to God without intermediaries and the spiritual equality of all believers in Christ. This does not imply that clergy are unnecessary; rather, all believers, not just a few church leaders, are invited to take on the priestly role of

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[32] Suppes, *Family Systems Theory Simplified*, 71.

sharing God's Word and caring for one another. Historically, the Church's hierarchical structure separated clergy and laity, creating a dependency of the laity on clergy for access to God. The Priesthood of All Believers challenges this hierarchy, advocating for all believers to be recognized as part of the "people of God" without distinctions based on position or status.[33] In small groups, participants are seen as equal members of God's people. Rather than a structure dominated by a few leaders, these groups encourage active, autonomous, and independent participation from all members.

In this context of spiritual equality and connection with God, all believers are empowered to take on a priestly role, caring for one another in Christ. Yet, the concept of the Priesthood of All Believers extends beyond personal access to God and spiritual equality. It also entails the responsibility to actively nurture and support each other. In small groups, participants are not merely attendees. They can serve as priests for one another, offering care, encouragement, and guidance. This shared responsibility fosters both accountable care and the formation of deep spiritual relationships.

Understanding the concept of differentiation of self can illuminate the practice of the Priesthood of All Believers. Differentiation highlights an individual's ability to maintain their identity while remaining emotionally connected to others. While believers enjoy personal access to God, this should not lead to withdrawal from active engagement in the faith community. Each member, whether clergy or laity, fulfills a functional role within the dynamic system of the community, mutually supporting and nurturing one another.

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[33] Maddix, "A Biblical Model of the People of God," 215.

It is crucial not to label any individual as inherently harmful to the group, as each member contributes uniquely to the community's spiritual growth. While all believers enjoy equal access to God, their active participation and collaboration within small groups are essential for collective spiritual development and the flourishing of the Priesthood of All Believers. In an interconnected system, the influence of each member is not always predictable. What may initially seem like a negative impact can turn out to be positive, and vice versa. Therefore, in small groups, we are called to respect one another while trusting how Christ, the Head, chooses to work through each of us.

Triangles in relationships illustrate how stability can shift under stress. A relationship between two people may appear stable until tension introduces a third party, creating a triangulated dynamic. A three-person system managing stress tends to be more resilient than a dyad, particularly when each person maintains a healthy balance of independence and connection.[34] This principle mirrors small group dynamics, where a third person can actively participate in caring for others, reflecting the responsibilities of the Priesthood of All Believers. Inviting Jesus Christ, the High Priest, into this relational system further reduces anxiety, strengthens love, and fosters interconnectedness within the community.

Family Systems Theory teaches that members within a unit do not exist in isolation as independent entities but are interconnected, continuously influencing one another. In a small group setting, each participant contributes to the group's dynamics, whether consciously or unconsciously. This framework deepens the understanding of

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[34] Peter Titelman, *Clinical Applications of Bowen Family Systems Theory* (New York, NY: The Haworth Press, 1998), 11.

mutual responsibility and care. Rather than viewing one's spiritual journey as separate from others, participants are encouraged to embrace their role as priests by sharing God's Word and actively caring for one another within the group.

Conclusion

Family Systems Theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and how their interactions shape the dynamics within a family system. Bowen Family Systems Theory provides valuable concepts that can be applied to develop and improve dynamics within Christian small groups.

The level of differentiation of self within a family significantly influences its dynamics. When self-differentiation is low, individuals tend to become overly dependent on others. Conversely, when fusion is weak, anxiety tends to rise. These two forces often operate in a complementary manner. Similarly, in small groups, if individuals do not cultivate a healthy differentiation of self, forming a personal relationship with God, they may become overly dependent on others for their spiritual growth. Deep personal encounters with God can be overshadowed by reliance on peers, creating an unhealthy dependency. Therefore, it is essential for each person to maintain their own identity while fostering a deep, direct relationship with God.

Conversely, if an individual remains too separated without meaningful fusion with others in the group, anxiety can increase, disrupting the healthy dynamics of the community. This raises the question: is it possible to balance differentiation of self and fusion? I believe such a balance may be attainable when we move beyond purely Western

perspectives on relational dynamics and explore a broader, more integrated understanding of relationships.

Family Systems Theory originated in a Western context, where individuality is highly valued. The theory posits that the more individuals can develop their own identity and independence within a family system, the healthier the system functions.[35] However, research in other cultural contexts, such as Korea, shows that high levels of both fusion and differentiation of self can coexist within families, resulting in improved family functioning. This is largely due to a greater emphasis on intimacy and communal connection in understanding relationships among family members.

Applying this insight to small groups, it is possible for both balanced differentiation of self and healthy fusion to occur simultaneously. In such groups, individuals can maintain direct access to God on a personal level while simultaneously experiencing deep togetherness with one another. This balance allows small groups to foster both personal spiritual growth and healthy relational dynamics, creating a vibrant, interconnected faith community.

While the concepts of Family Systems Theory provide valuable insights for understanding and developing small groups, they are not formulas that can be universally applied like mathematical equations. Small groups share similarities with family units, as individuals are relationally interconnected, influencing and being influenced by one another. However, unlike family relationships, the connections in small groups are not inherent by birth but are intentionally chosen through active participation. These relationships can also be more easily disconnected, which requires careful consideration

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[35] Suppes, *Family Systems Theory Simplified*, 201.

when applying Family Systems Theory to small groups. In this context, togetherness may need to be emphasized more strongly than in family systems. Without intentional nurturing, relationships formed in small groups could dissolve more easily than familial bonds. Here, the principle from the Priesthood of All Believers can help sustain and strengthen these connections over time, encouraging each member to take responsibility for caring for others.

In conclusion, Family Systems Theory provides valuable insights for understanding and enhancing dynamics within Christian small groups. When applying this theory, we recognize that each participant is part of an interconnected system, where individual faith journeys influence and are influenced by others. Rather than viewing personal faith in isolation from the community, this perspective allows us to see how each member's spiritual journey is connected and mutually impactful. These interconnected relationships can give rise to conflicts, tension, and increased anxiety. However, in small groups, relationships extend beyond interactions among members to include a vital connection with Christ, the Head of the body. By keeping Christ central, the dynamics within the group can shift in unexpected ways, leading to positive influence and outcomes that surpass what human effort alone could achieve. In this way, through God's guidance and unforeseen intervention, both individuals and the group can grow in maturity and spiritual vitality.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Within the church, each believer is connected both to one another and to God. When these connections are weak or remain superficial, individual faith can stagnate, and the entire faith community may lose its vitality. Recognizing these interconnections and intentionally building deep relationships is essential, not only for personal spiritual growth but also for sustaining or restoring the church's vibrancy.

Ephesians 4:11-16 describes the church as the body of Christ. Just as a body comprises diverse parts, individual believers bring unique gifts and roles to the body of Christ. This diversity, however, can also create challenges, as it did in the Ephesian church, leading to conflict and division. The passage teaches that true unity in diversity is possible only under Christ, the head of the body. This unity does not require giving up or losing one's distinct identity; rather, each person's uniqueness is respected, creating diversity that contributes to oneness without separation. Such unity is achievable only in Christ. When diversity is harmonized in Him, the parts do not divide or compete but grow together as one. Spiritual maturity, therefore, is not attained in isolation. It requires mutual support fostered through deep and intentional relationships.

These kinds of deep relationships are often more easily formed in small groups. In the early church, believers frequently gathered in homes, creating small, intimate communities. In modern times, small groups within the church can serve a similar

purpose. This project therefore limited participation to 12 people, aiming to explore how group members could support one another in developing deeper relationships both with each other and with God.

The Quaker tradition provides a meaningful example. In Quaker worship, silence plays a crucial role in deepening one's relationship with God and with others. This silence is not simply the absence of sound, but an active form of participation through attentive listening. Quaker worship emphasizes that direct access to God is possible without any human mediator, encouraging personal encounters with God without relying on another person. Yet, this relationship is not accomplished by human effort alone. It is realized through Christ. Furthermore, active listening fosters stronger connections among group members. With these principles in mind, the project incorporated practices of silence and attentive listening throughout the six-week period.

Many Christians today tend to leave leadership responsibilities solely to pastors. This often results in believers relying too heavily on clergy for their spiritual growth, and even delegating their own roles and responsibilities to the pastor. However, as Martin Luther emphasized, all believers share in the priesthood. This doctrine challenges the traditional hierarchical church structure by removing the strict division between clergy and laity, while still respecting the different roles within the body of Christ. Since all believers have direct access to God, they can engage deeply with their faith and share their experiences without depending on others. Moreover, caring for one another is not just the responsibility of pastors. All believers are called to care for others as part of their shared priesthood. Small groups provide a space for this mutual care, allowing members to support one another in faith and growth. In small groups, each person can take on the

role and responsibility of a priest, caring for others. Through this, a strong sense of spiritual connection can develop as believers journey together toward spiritual maturity.

Small groups often function like families, composed of a small number of people in close relationship. Understanding family dynamics can therefore be helpful in comprehending how relationships in small groups operate. Bowen Family Systems Theory offers a useful framework for this purpose, viewing individuals as parts of an interconnected system in which each person's behavior affects and is affected by others. This perspective helps us understand the dynamics of small groups, which often mirror those of families. By learning about Family Systems Theory, participants can better grasp the interactions within their groups and how their relationships are interconnected.

With these foundations in mind, the six-week project was designed. The goal was that through this small group program, focusing on spiritual companionship with others and intimacy with God, participants would come to understand the importance of meaningful connections in leading a vibrant journey of faith.

Methodology

Due to the limited number of participants and the short duration of this project, data collection was conducted using qualitative research methods. This included direct surveys and interviews to gather participants' thoughts and opinions, as well as both direct and indirect observations carried out during the sessions.

The six-week program varied in content and activities according to each session's theme. However, each session consistently followed a structured format: a time of personal faith-sharing, a lecture, an activity, group discussion and application, and

finally, a period of centering prayer in silence. Seating was arranged in a circular format so that all participants could see one another, which also facilitated observational data collection throughout each session. Observations extended beyond verbal communication to include changes in participants' behavior and facial expressions. These non-verbal cues were especially valuable during experiential activities, such as puzzle-solving and the hand-washing ceremony.

With the consent of all participants, each session was audio recorded. The recordings are stored securely for three years and will then be permanently deleted. These recordings were primarily used to ensure that participants' personal stories, discussions, and applications shared during the sessions were preserved. To protect participants' privacy, each individual was identified not by name but by a combination of an English letter and a three-digit number (e.g., A-000).

Before and after the project, participants completed questionnaires. Most questions were consistent across the pre- and post-project surveys to assess changes that may have occurred during the program. The pre-survey also collected background information, including recent experiences in small groups and length of church attendance, while the post-survey included additional questions focused on participants' perceived impact of the program. These surveys served both to capture individual perspectives and to measure shifts over the six-week period. The collected responses were also used to generate visual data representations, such as percentages and graphs.

Following the conclusion of the six-week program, individual interviews were conducted with each participant to gather more in-depth data. The interview questions included:

1. Can you describe how your views on small group have changed through this program? (Personal Reflection)
2. How have your relationships with God and fellow participants changed during the program? (Impact on Relationships)
3. How did your experience of sharing the prayer you wrote during the sessions differ from your time spent alone in spiritual discipline?
4. Did you face any challenges or barriers during the program? If so, how did you overcome them? (Barriers and Challenges)

Because each participant had unique interests, learning experiences, and levels of engagement, the interviews provided a richer layer of data that could not be captured through surveys alone. They offered additional insights and helped interpret survey findings from multiple angles. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent, and the recordings will be stored and deleted under the same conditions as the session recordings.

Another method of data collection involved the use of a prayer note, distributed at the beginning of the project. Participants were encouraged to write a personal prayer each week. This practice aimed to foster private, reflective time with God and provided a space for deeper contemplation beyond the immediate responses shared during group discussions and application activities. The language and expressions in these written prayers were also analyzed to observe potential spiritual or emotional changes throughout the program.

Together with the surveys, interviews, and observational data, the prayer notes complemented and enriched the overall dataset, allowing for a multi-dimensional analysis of the transformations experienced by participants. Collectively, these methods helped evaluate whether the project achieved its intended goals.

Implementation

This project was conducted over six weeks during the season of Lent, a time devoted to deepening faith and renewing one's relationship with God. The project aimed to help participants experience spiritual growth both with God and in relationship with others. Since the purpose of Lent aligns with the project's goal of fostering deeper connections with God, holding the program during this season was expected to encourage active participation. The six-week structure focused on strengthening bonds among participants within the small group while cultivating closer relationships with God, giving the program additional spiritual significance. Each session was held for 90 minutes every Friday from 10:00 AM to 11:30 AM.

The project schedule was as follows:

Table 4. Project Schedule

Date	Descriptions
February 1, 2025	Begin recruitment of participants
February 28, 2025	Week One: Introduction and Life Story
March 7, 2025	Week Two: Diversity and Unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16)
March 14, 2025	Week Three: A Listening Heart in Quaker Worship
March 21, 2025	Week Four: The Priesthood of All Believers
March 28, 2025	Week Five: We Are More Connected Than We Think
April 4, 2025	Week Six: Holistic Review
April 4-17, 2025	Post Project survey and One-to-One Interviews
April, 2025	Collect and analyze Data

Careful planning was undertaken to create a dynamic and balanced group environment. One-third of the participants were new to the church, while two-thirds were long-time members familiar with many others in the congregation. A total of 12 participants registered, successfully maintaining the desired balance. To facilitate

interaction among participants who did not yet know one another, name tags were placed on the tables and kept in front of each participant throughout the six weeks. This approach helped participants quickly learn each other's names, reduced the need for repeated introductions, and fostered a more comfortable and connected atmosphere.

Meetings were held in a church room typically used for Bible study. Since the existing tables and chairs could not accommodate twelve people comfortably in a circle, additional furniture was brought in and arranged so all participants could face one another. This intentional setup encouraged open discussion, shifted focus away from a single speaker or facilitator, and promoted equitable participation. By creating a space where each person could see and engage with everyone else, the arrangement helped participants feel that all voices were equally valued.

Participants were not assigned seats, allowing them the freedom to sit wherever they wished. This flexibility encouraged them to sit next to different people over the six weeks, fostering opportunities to naturally build new connections and share their experiences and thoughts with a variety of group members.

Although the specific content of each session varied according to the weekly theme, the overall structure remained consistent: sharing reflections from the past week, a short lecture, an activity, group discussion and application, and a centering prayer. Each session began with a volunteer offering an opening prayer, often using a prayer previously written in their personal prayer note. To make efficient use of the 90-minute sessions, a timer was used to guide the flow according to the planned schedule. However, flexibility was maintained when important sharing or discussion arose, allowing the session to adjust as needed rather than moving on abruptly.

Thirty minutes before each session, coffee and light refreshments were provided. This practice supported the goal of relationship-building, enabling participants to engage in relaxed conversations before and after the sessions. In addition, each participant's seat was prepared with session materials and lecture notes, helping them follow the content naturally and organize information throughout the project. Materials related to activities and discussions were also provided, offering clear guidance to help participants stay oriented and engaged in the group process.

At the conclusion of each session, the group prayed together using a prepared prayer included in the session materials, which reflected the day's theme. Following the prayer, participants spent time freely conversing and sharing with one another. Name tags, which had been placed on the tables at the beginning of each session, were collected afterward to be reused the following week.

Up to this point, I have described the elements that were consistently prepared and implemented across all sessions. The following section will detail the specific implementation of each individual session in the six-week project.

Week One: Introduction and Life Story

The first session focused on introducing participants and fostering initial connections. The schedule was as follows:

20 minutes: Program introduction and pre-survey
10 minutes: Answering the "Four Quaker Questions"
40 minutes: Sharing life stories based on the answers
10 minutes: Q&A session about the program and the prayer note
10 minutes: Centering prayer and closing

As the opening session of the six-week project, time was spent explaining the topics to be covered and the session structure. Although a Google Forms link for the pre-survey had been sent via email beforehand, printed copies were also provided for participants who preferred completing the survey by hand. Prayer notes were distributed, enabling each participant to write one prayer per week throughout the program. Additionally, participants decorated a nameplate using their preferred colors, which was placed in front of them and used for all six weeks to facilitate recognition and connection.

The first session was designed to help participants become familiar with one another, fostering the development of spiritual relationships, a central element of the project. To support this, we used the Four Quaker Questions, traditionally employed by Quakers to encourage personal storytelling and spiritual reflection. While there are variations in different settings, the following set of questions was selected for this session:[1]

1. Where did you live between the ages of seven and twelve, and how many brothers and sisters did you have at that time?
2. How did you heat your home during that period, or was there a time when you were extremely cold and getting warm was crucial to you?
3. Who in your home provided the sense of human warmth, or where in your home was there a place of human warmth?
4. When, if ever, did God become more than a word to you?

Participants were given approximately ten minutes to reflect on their answers and organize their thoughts before sharing. Each person then had roughly four minutes to share their life story, ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to speak. A visual timer was used to help manage time and keep the session on schedule.

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[1] Jack Carmichael, *One Barrel at a Time* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse LLC, 2013), 279.

At the end of the session, Centering Prayer, a practice of silent, reflective prayer, was introduced to be incorporated into each week's gathering. After a brief explanation, participants engaged in five minutes of silent prayer together. The session concluded with everyone joining hands in a large circle for a closing prayer, marking the formal end of the first session.

Week Two: Diversity and Unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16)

The second session built upon the Biblical Foundations and focused on exploring, discussing, and applying the teachings of Ephesians 4:11–16. The session's detailed schedule was as follows:

20 minutes: Sharing personal reflections on the past week
10 minutes: Reading Ephesians 4:11–16 in various Bible versions
20 minutes: Lesson on diversity and unity as the body of Christ
30 minutes: Group discussion on applying the lesson to life
10 minutes: Centering prayer and closing

The session began with a volunteer opening in prayer using a personal prayer note. Participants were then invited to share reflections on their past week, drawing inspiration from traditional Wesleyan class meeting questions, such as, "How is it with your soul?"[2] To facilitate more intimate sharing, participants were divided into pairs or small groups of three. Some groups shared general experiences from the week, while others focused more specifically on their spiritual lives and relationships with God. This practice helped deepen connections among participants and provided mutual encouragement in their faith journeys.

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[2] Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 25.

The focus of the session was on Ephesians 4:11–16, emphasizing diversity and unity in the body of Christ. Four different Bible translations—the New Revised Standard Version, New King James Version, Contemporary English Version, and The Message—were used. Participants took turns reading the passage aloud, observing similarities and differences in wording and style, and reflecting on how the core message of unity in diversity was conveyed across translations.

Following this, the session moved into the teaching portion, where the principles of diversity, unity, and interconnection in the body of Christ were discussed in depth. Participants were encouraged to consider how these principles might apply to their personal lives and relationships, both within the small group and in the wider faith community.

The lesson was delivered using a prepared lecture note, with participants' versions containing key words and phrases left blank. This interactive format encouraged active engagement and curiosity, allowing participants to fill in the blanks during the teaching. Ample space was also provided beside the main content for personal reflections and notes, enabling participants to create a personalized record of their learning.

The teaching began with a brief introduction to the historical background, characteristics, and purpose of the letter to the Ephesians. Emphasis was placed on the diversity of the early Ephesian church and the strong biblical call for unity. To illustrate this concept, the metaphor of the body of Christ was explored, highlighting that, just as different parts of the body have unique functions, each believer contributes distinctively to the whole body of Christ.

Following the lecture, participants engaged with a body outline illustration to reflect on the role they might represent within the body of Christ. Small group discussions were then guided by prepared reflection questions. While some questions focused on understanding the biblical concepts, others encouraged participants to connect the lesson to their personal experiences and spiritual challenges, fostering both self-reflection and group dialogue.

The session concluded with five minutes of centering prayer in silence, inviting participants into a deeper sense of intimacy with God. Finally, the group joined in a prepared closing prayer centered on unity in Christ, bringing the session to a meaningful close.

Week Three: A Listening Heart in Quaker Worship

The third session was based on the Historical Foundations, focusing on how silence in Quaker worship fosters relationships with God and with one another. The detailed schedule was as follows:

20 minutes: Sharing personal reflections on the past week
20 minutes: Lesson on the principles of Quakerism
10 minutes: Comparison between Quakerism and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral
30 minutes: Group discussion on the lesson and personal application
10 minutes: Centering prayer and closing

The session began with two reflection questions to encourage participants to share about their spiritual journeys: “How is your life with God this week?” and “Is there any area in which you are struggling and need prayer?” Participants discussed these questions with a partner and spent time praying for one another regarding the struggles shared.

The teaching portion used a prepared lecture note, with key terms and important information left blank for participants to fill in during the session. The historical background of Quakerism was presented, emphasizing the core values of early Quakers, including inward encounters with God, spiritual equality, an understanding of rituals and sacraments, and peace and pacifism. Particular attention was given to the practice of silence in Quaker worship, which was described not as mere quietness but as a dynamic act of waiting for God, cultivating attentive listening and deepening one's relationship with God.

A comparison was then drawn between Quakerism and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, highlighting both areas of convergence and points of distinction. This exercise enabled participants to see how differing theological frameworks approach Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in shaping faith and practice. To reinforce their learning, a brief true/false quiz was provided, allowing participants to review key ideas in a simple and engaging way.

To deepen reflection, a passage from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* was shared, underscoring the essential role of silence and listening in the Christian journey: "One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies."[3] This reminder of the spiritual

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[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1954), 97-98

discipline of listening invited participants to consider silence not as absence, but as an active posture of openness to God and to one another.

The session concluded with a group discussion, where participants shared insights from the lesson and applied them to their own lives. Finally, the group engaged in five to ten minutes of centering prayer in silence, followed by a prepared closing prayer, reinforcing the importance of listening and attentiveness in nurturing relationships with God and others.

Week Four: The Priesthood of All Believers

The fourth session focused on the Theological Foundations, exploring the concept of the Priesthood of All Believers. The detailed schedule was as follows:

20 minutes: Sharing personal reflections on the past week
20 minutes: Lesson on the Priesthood of All Believers
30 minutes: Group discussion on the lesson and life reflection
10 minutes: Activity: Washing each other's hands (symbolic act of service)
10 minutes: Centering prayer and closing

The session highlighted key principles of the Priesthood of All Believers: personal access to God, equality before God, and responsibility to one another. Emphasis was placed not only on building relationships within the small group but also on nurturing a sense of responsibility to care for and serve others beyond the group setting.

To move from theoretical understanding to practical experience, a Handwashing Ceremony was incorporated after the group discussion. This activity provided a tangible way to experience mutual service and care. Before the session, a pot of water, a bowl for washing, and towels were prepared.

The ceremony began with a reading from John 13:12-17, reflecting on Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Participants washed one another's hands instead of feet, symbolizing love, humility, and service. As each person's hands were washed, the pastor accompanied the action with the words, "As Jesus served, I serve you," reinforcing the spirit of humility and mutual care. Towels were used to dry the hands, further emphasizing the practical and symbolic aspects of service.

The session concluded with five to ten minutes of centering prayer in silence, allowing participants to reflect on the experience. Finally, a closing prayer was led collectively, affirming the shared responsibility to serve and care for one another within the body of Christ.

Week Five: We Are More Connected Than We Think

The fifth session focused on the Interdisciplinary Foundations, highlighting Bowen Family Systems Theory. The detailed schedule was as follows:

20 minutes: Sharing personal reflections on the past week
10 minutes: Activity: Completing a puzzle
20 minutes: Lesson on Family Systems Theory
30 minutes: Group discussion on applying the theory to personal and church life
10 minutes: Centering prayer and closing

To introduce the concept of interconnectedness, the session began with a jigsaw puzzle activity. Participants were divided into groups of two to three and chose from six different puzzles, each containing approximately 30 pieces. This activity allowed them to experience firsthand how individual pieces, like people, connect to form a larger whole. It provided a visual and practical illustration of cooperation and highlighted the importance of each member's contribution.

Following the activity, a lecture on Bowen Family Systems Theory was presented, covering key concepts such as differentiation of self, togetherness, and the mutual influence individuals have within a system. Participants were then guided to create simple genograms of their own families. This exercise helped them identify patterns of behavior, emotional connections, and relationship dynamics, while reflecting on how individuation and togetherness are expressed within their families. Volunteers shared their genograms and observations, which facilitated deeper understanding of interconnectedness and relational influence.

The session concluded with a group discussion, encouraging participants to reflect on how these concepts apply to their experiences within the small group and in church life. Finally, the session ended with five to ten minutes of centering prayer in silence, followed by a closing prayer led collectively, fostering unity and reflection on the interconnectedness of relationships within both the family of God and the small group.

Week Six: Living as a Connected and Transforming Community

The sixth and final session focused on summarizing and reflecting on the lessons learned over the past five weeks. The detailed schedule was as follows:

20 minutes: Sharing personal reflections on the past week
20 minutes: Summary of the previous lessons
20 minutes: Group discussion on the previous lessons
10 minutes: Collect prayer notes and schedule individual interviews
10 minutes: Holy Communion
10 minutes: Centering prayer and closing

The session began with participants sharing reflections on their spiritual lives over the past week, using questions inspired by Wesleyan class meetings. Following this, the group revisited key points from all previous sessions, reinforcing the lessons learned.

Participants engaged in a discussion around the question, “What does it mean to you that we are more connected than we think?” This allowed them to reflect on the interconnectedness and deep relationships with God and others emphasized throughout the program.

Practical and logistical matters were also addressed, including providing the post-survey link (with printed versions for those who preferred them), collecting the weekly prayer notes, and scheduling individual interviews with participants.

The program concluded with the celebration of Holy Communion, using the intinction method, where participants dipped a piece of bread into a shared cup. This practice symbolized the unity of the group and the connection of each member as one body in Christ. After communion, participants spent time in silent centering prayer, followed by a closing prayer, with all members joining hands in a circle, marking the conclusion of the six-week program and emphasizing communal support, spiritual growth, and connectedness.

Individual Interviews

After the completion of the six-week program, individual interviews were conducted over a two-week period. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, providing participants with the opportunity to share personal reflections and experiences from the program. Interviews were held in locations chosen for the participants’ convenience, including the church office, coffee shops, or other suitable venues.

These interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of each participant’s perspective, capturing insights that were not fully expressed during group sessions or

surveys. They provided valuable qualitative data on personal growth, relational dynamics, and the impact of the program on participants' spiritual lives.

Summary of Learning

The goal of the project was to help participants learn and experience spiritual companionship with others and intimacy with God over the course of six weeks, and in doing so, to recognize how essential these connections are for cultivating a vibrant spiritual life. To assess any shifts in understanding, participants completed identical pre- and post-surveys, focusing on their knowledge of each session's theme. Comparing these responses allowed for the identification of any noticeable changes in comprehension and perspective.

Throughout the six weeks, the lectures addressed themes such as diversity, unity, spiritual equality, personal access to God, and interconnectedness, drawing on Ephesians 4:11–16 and insights from Quaker worship, the Priesthood of All Believers, and Bowen Family Systems Theory. Each session incorporated related activities to reinforce these themes and provide experiential learning. Although 12 participants initially registered, one was unable to complete the program, resulting in 11 participants for the post-survey.

Increase of Understanding

First, we examine participants' responses to the question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about Quakerism? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)" The first chart shows the results from the pre-survey, and the second shows the results from the post-survey.

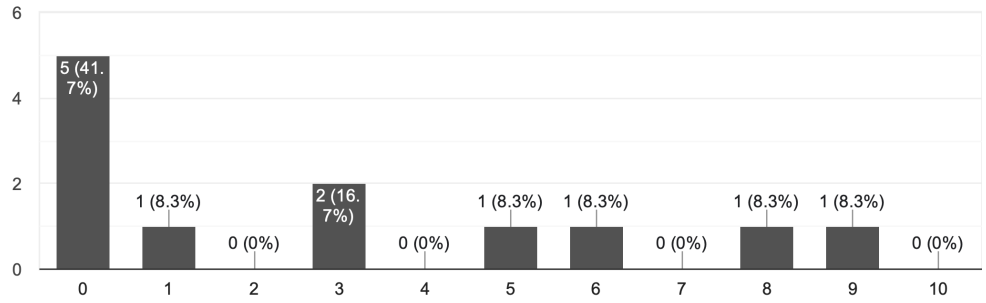


Figure 1. Pre-Survey Responses to the Question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about Quakerism? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)"

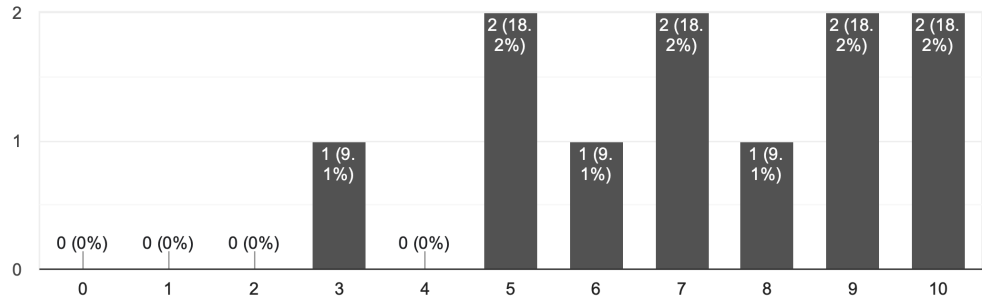


Figure 2. Post-Survey Responses to the Question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about Quakerism? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)"

Next, we look at the responses to: "How knowledgeable do you feel about The Priesthood of All Believers? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)" Again, the first chart reflects the pre-survey, and the second the post-survey.

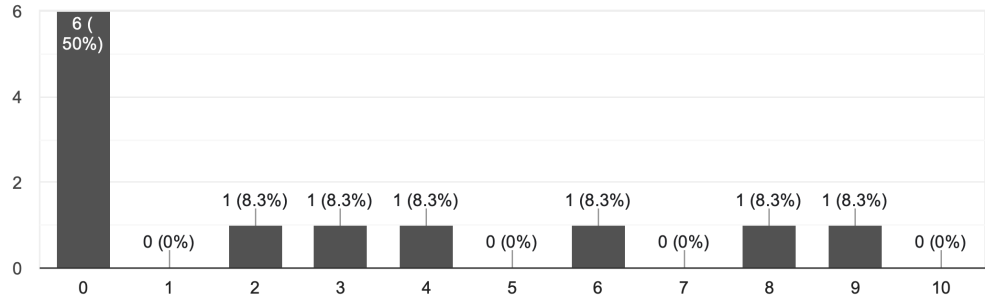


Figure 3. Pre-Survey Responses to the Question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about the Priesthood of All Believers? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)"

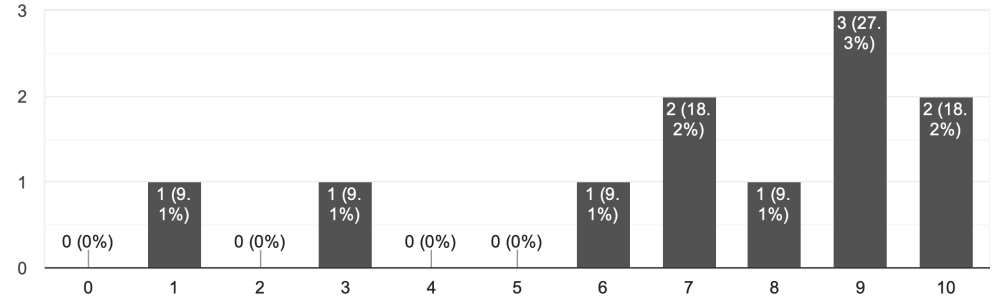


Figure 4. Post-Survey Responses to the Question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about the Priesthood of All Believers? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)"

Finally, participants responded to: "How knowledgeable do you feel about Family Systems Theory? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)" The first chart shows the pre-survey results, followed by the post-survey results.

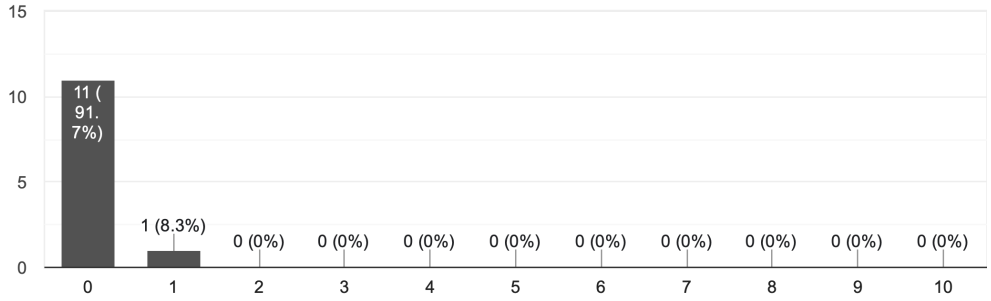


Figure 5. Pre-Survey Responses to the Question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about Family Systems Theory? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)"

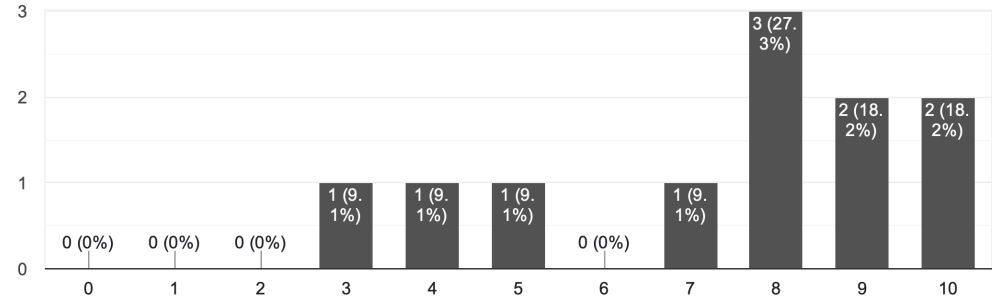


Figure 6. Post-Survey Responses to the Question: "How knowledgeable do you feel about Family Systems Theory? (0 = very little, 10 = very much)"

As shown in the change in participant responses regarding Quaker worship, the Priesthood of All Believers, and Bowen Family Systems Theory, participants clearly grew in their understanding of each topic through the six-week project. Moreover, through these themes, they gained insight into how essential relational connection is to the life of faith and recognized that experiencing intimacy with God is vital for spiritual growth.

This shift in understanding was further evident in the individual interviews. Many participants referenced concepts learned during the six sessions, either directly or indirectly. For example, one participant (A-003) discussed the Priesthood of All Believers in relation to mutual care within the group, saying: "We are all priests, and we should all minister to everyone. I just had not thought of that before." This statement clearly demonstrates an increased understanding and a new awareness of shared spiritual responsibility by the end of the program.

While the survey charts show clear growth in participants' knowledge of each topic, the deeper question remains: Did this increased understanding foster deeper relationships within the small group, and did it influence participants' relationships with God and their broader spiritual life? I will address this question when discussing the changes participants experienced in their intimacy with God before and after the project.

Spiritual Companionship

In the post-survey, participants were asked the following question: "How much has the depth and quality of your relationships with fellow church members changed after participating in the program? (1 = no change, 10 = significantly deeper and more

meaningful)" Over 90% of the participants indicated that their relationships had become deeper and more meaningful through the six-week project.

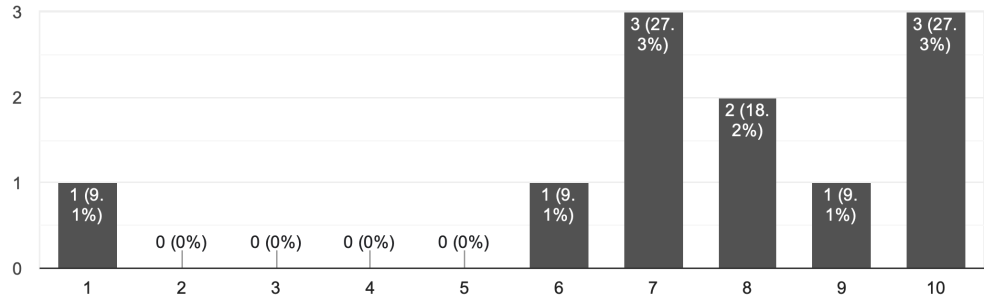


Figure 7. Responses to the Question: "How much has the depth and quality of your relationships with fellow church members changed after participating in the program? (1 = no change, 10 = significantly deeper and more meaningful)"

The growth in spiritual companionship within the small group was further reflected in participants' responses to the post-survey question: "Can you share a specific moment during the program that stood out to you? What made it significant?" While the responses varied, many emphasized how relationships had deepened. Some examples include: "Interactions and sharing in groups of two or three, Connected on a deeper level (A-001)", "When I felt connected to the other people in the group (A-009)", "How we all shared our spiritual growth (A-009)", "I learned a lot about my fellow students (A-005)", "No specific moment, but learning more about the other individuals in the program was significant for me.(A-007)"

These responses demonstrate that participants did more than learn about the importance of relationships through the program's topics. They actively experienced meaningful connections within the small group. Over the six weeks, these spiritual connections deepened, strengthening both individual faith journeys and the sense of community among participants.

This growth in spiritual companionship was also evident in the individual interviews. One participant (A-003) shared, “I thought I knew her a little bit, but I got to know her a lot better.” Although participants had attended church together for some time, the small group setting allowed them to develop a deeper understanding of one another through shared learning, conversation, and prayer. The participant described it as an opportunity to “get to the soul of someone,” indicating that what formed was not mere social familiarity but genuine spiritual companionship.

Another participant (A-006) remarked, “I love their input.” This illustrates that the group was not structured around a single person teaching while others listened. Instead, it functioned as a dynamic community where everyone was connected, learning from one another. Participants were not passive. They actively influenced and were influenced by others, highlighting the interconnected nature of the group.

A third participant (A-009) initially found it difficult to share personal matters. Her pre-survey responses indicated that she had not participated in a small group for the past five years. However, during the interview, she reflected, “As I got to know the group and more people shared, I felt more comfortable in expressing myself and relating to them.” As the relationships deepened, she was able to share more openly and added, “It has now encouraged me to participate in more small groups.” This demonstrates that forming relationships within a small group not only fosters deeper connections but also empowers individuals to live more dynamic spiritual lives by opening up and engaging more fully.

Intimacy with God

In addition to improved relationships with others, most respondents also indicated a deepening of their relationship with God. This was evident in their answers to the post-survey question: “How would you rate your relationship with God now compared to the beginning of the program? (1 = more distant, 5 = same, 10 = closer)”

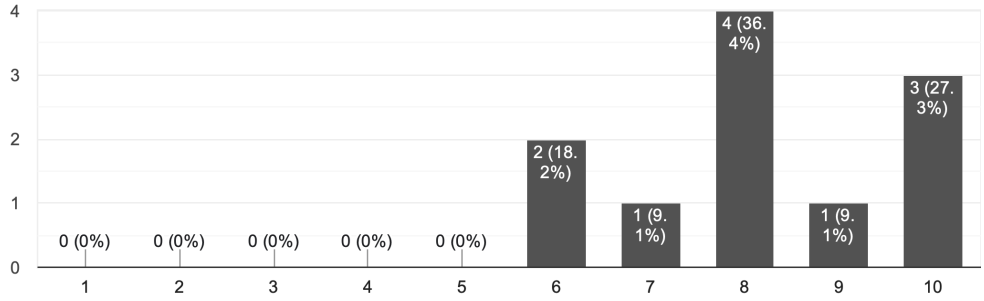


Figure 8. Responses to the Question: “How would you rate your relationship with God now compared to the beginning of the program? (1 = more distant, 5 = same, 10 = closer)”

Another post-survey question asked, “How satisfied are you with your overall spiritual growth and progress during the program? (0 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied).” Here, 36.4 percent of participants gave the highest score of 10, indicating they were very satisfied, and a total of 90.8 percent rated their satisfaction at 7 or higher. This demonstrates that most participants experienced a clear sense of closer relationship with God through the project.

Over the six-week small group sessions, participants not only deepened their understanding of each weekly theme through learning, activities, and discussion, but this growth also contributed to more meaningful relationships with others. These interpersonal connections were closely linked to their relationship with God. The findings suggest that participants came to recognize that spiritual connection with others and

intimacy with God are not separate experiences; rather, they are interconnected and essential for cultivating a vibrant faith journey.

This transformation was also reflected in participants' personal spiritual practices. When asked how much time they spent weekly on personal spiritual disciplines (outside of group or public settings), noticeable changes were observed. Before the program, only 25 percent reported spending 40 to 50 minutes per week. After six weeks, that number increased to 36.4 percent. Even more strikingly, the proportion of participants spending more than 50 minutes per week rose from 16.7 percent in the pre-survey to 45.5 percent in the post-survey.

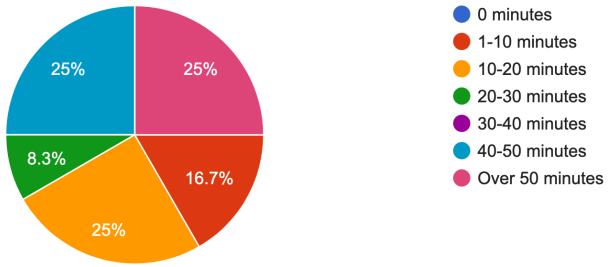


Figure 9. Pre-Survey Responses to the Question: "In total, how many minutes per week do you spend engaging in personal spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, Bible reading) on your own, not with others or in groups?"

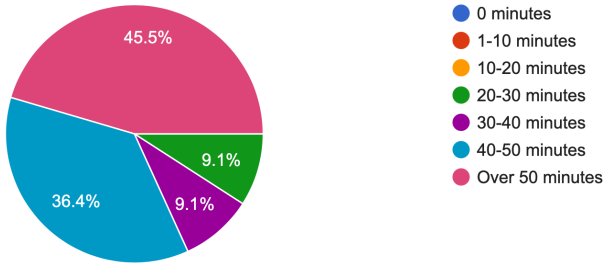


Figure 10. Post-Survey Responses to the Question: "In total, how many minutes per week do you spend engaging in personal spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, Bible reading) on your own, not with others or in groups?"

This increase was not merely the result of additional time; rather, it demonstrated that participants began to value these moments more deeply and gave them greater

priority. As relationships within the small group matured through sharing and prayer, participants also grew more attentive to their relationship with God. This heightened attentiveness nurtured a stronger commitment to personal spiritual disciplines, which in turn supported the development of vibrant spiritual lives. Finally, when asked whether they would recommend this type of small group to others, 90.9 percent of participants responded affirmatively. This indicates that the deepened relationships with others and with God had a positive and lasting impact, leading participants to genuinely value and affirm the experience.

Activities and Prayer Note

Each session included various activities designed to match the theme of the week. These activities were intended not only to convey knowledge but also to help participants gain deeper meaning through hands-on experiences. Activities included identifying which part of the body of Christ one felt called to be, true/false quizzes, a handwashing ceremony, jigsaw puzzles, family genograms, and Communion. One participant (A-002) shared that the handwashing ceremony was particularly impactful, while another (A-004) noted that Communion was especially meaningful. These activities played a supplementary role in helping participants both understand and embody the content more deeply, whether directly or indirectly.

The prayer note was designed not only for use during the gatherings but also as a practice participants could carry into their daily lives. By writing out their prayers, participants cultivated time for prayer and sought to deepen their intimacy with God. One participant (A-003) wrote in her prayer note: “Our Heavenly Father, give me silent

focused time with you. I struggle to focus as my thoughts roam to so many distractions. Calm the background noise and help me stay with you." This prayer reveals both an honest longing to focus on God and the difficulty of doing so amid distractions. It also reflects a desire for silence, in other words, an active attentiveness to God's voice. Another participant (A-012) wrote: "Loving God, open my eyes that I may see how to approach a couple people. Yesterday I felt you were moving me to see a different side to an issue with one of them. Please lead me where I should go." Here, the prayer moves beyond the individual's relationship with God to encompass relationships with those around them. Taken together, these examples show that the prayer notes provided participants with an opportunity to be honest before God. They also reveal how prayer nurtured not only a deeper personal relationship with God but also a relational attentiveness that extended outward to others.

One participant (A-006) remarked during an interview, "I was so eager to do that," referring to writing the prayer note. Another (A-004) reflected, "I noticed that my prayers that I wrote down were more about me than my long list of intercessory prayers." She shared that while she typically devoted much of her prayer time to others, the prayer note helped her turn more intentionally toward her own relationship with God.

At the same time, not all participants experienced the prayer note positively. Some found it difficult to write, while others felt uncomfortable sharing their prayers with the group. For instance, one participant (A-009) chose not to share because of uneasiness about reading personal prayers aloud. Others admitted that knowing their prayers might be read by someone else made them self-conscious, leading them to write with others in mind rather than focusing authentically on their relationship with God.

Overall, the prayer note served as an important means of cultivating spiritual relationships through prayer in daily life. However, the experiences varied according to each participant's spiritual journey and comfort level. While many found the practice helpful in deepening their relationship with God, for some it was less beneficial. This suggests that while personal prayer plays a vital role in nurturing intimacy with God, the methods by which individuals engage in prayer must be adaptable to their unique needs and circumstances.

Conclusion

This six-week project was carried out under the hypothesis that if participants learned about and experienced spiritual companionship and intimacy within small groups, they would come to recognize the importance of these connections for cultivating vibrant faith journeys. To collect qualitative data, methods such as pre- and post-surveys, individual interviews, and direct and indirect observations of participants and group dynamics were employed.

The findings confirmed this hypothesis. Participants not only deepened their understanding of each week's theme but also discovered how theological and practical concepts could be embodied in a small group context. They increasingly recognized the value of nurturing relationships with one another and with God, and they came to see these connections as essential to their spiritual vitality. Ultimately, this six-week project demonstrated that meaningful connections formed through shared learning, prayer, and life-sharing play a crucial role in fostering vibrant and transformative faith journeys. An interesting finding from this project is that, despite its brief duration of only six weeks,

participants did not merely come to understand the importance of spiritual connection but also demonstrated an impact in their overall faith journey. As the project concluded, several participants expressed a desire to join additional small groups. Moreover, across all participants, there was an observable increase in the amount of time dedicated to personal spiritual disciplines. This indicates that even within a relatively short period, learning about and experiencing spiritual companionship can significantly foster spiritual interconnectivity, which in turn has a positive impact on one's faith journey.

Beyond the small group meetings, approximately 40% of participants increased their church attendance compared to before the project. Participants were also observed reaching out to one another outside the formal sessions to share about their faith, demonstrating an increase in mutual care and support.

These findings suggest that the project not only helped participants recognize the essential role of relationships in cultivating vibrant spiritual lives but also encouraged more active engagement in spiritual practices and fostered tangible changes in their faith journeys. Furthermore, the ripple effect of these changes, such as the increased attendance in Sunday worship, demonstrates the potential of small group ministry to contribute to renewed vitality across the life of the church.

However, this project is not without its limitations. The first limitation concerns its relatively short duration. Attempting to cultivate deep spiritual relationships within a span of only six weeks presented inherent challenges. While participants gained an appreciation for the importance of these connections, and some demonstrated potential for genuine change, there were also responses indicating little to no perceived growth in relationships. Extending the project over a longer period may have not only deepened

participants' awareness of the role of connection and community in faith, but also allowed for more observable and sustainable changes in both their relationships and spiritual practices.

A second limitation relates to the fixed, six-week framework of the project. Spiritual formation is not a temporary endeavor but an ongoing, lifelong process. Although participants came to understand the importance of cultivating relationships with one another and with God, the project design did not provide an avenue for exploring how continued, interconnected gatherings might nurture lasting transformation. Nevertheless, the data suggests that if participants were to remain engaged in small groups centered on spiritual companionship, there would be significant potential for dynamic and sustained growth in their faith journeys.

Sustained small group activity remains an ongoing challenge for any congregation. However, by the conclusion of the six-week project, four participants expressed a desire to begin a small group where they could intentionally cultivate spiritual relationships and intimacy with God. In response, they invited additional church members to join the conversation. This willingness to initiate a group immediately, rather than postponing the development of deeper relationships, demonstrates a direct outcome of the six-week project.

Following the project, we used Kevin Watson's book *The Class Meeting* as a guide and engaged in an additional eight-week study of John Wesley's class meetings, adapting the practices to our own context. This initiative has now developed into a weekly gathering on Thursday evenings called "John Wesley's Class Meeting." Our hope is that this group will not merely function as a space to acquire new biblical knowledge or

as a regular fellowship gathering, but rather as a transformative community where participants share moments of grace and challenges from the past week, pray for and encourage one another, and grow together in faith.

Building upon the lessons learned in the project, we continue to emphasize the importance of relationships. Each meeting includes prayer, reflection on Scripture, life-sharing, and intercession for one another, all of which serve to deepen spiritual relationships both with God and with each other.

In conclusion, when participants engaged in a six-week small group program designed to foster spiritual companionship with others and intimacy with God, their understanding of the importance of these connections for cultivating vibrant faith journeys deepened. Evidence of this growth was not only reflected in their knowledge and practices but also in their active participation in spiritual life. Ultimately, when deep spiritual relationships with one another and intimacy with God are nurtured within small groups, transformation extends beyond individual lives. It generates renewed energy and vitality within the entire church, contributing to a more dynamic and vibrant community of faith.

APPENDIX A

PRE-PROJECT SURVEY

PRE-PROJECT SURVEY

Q1. In the last five years, how many small groups have you participated in?

(Never, 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, over 10)

Q2. What was your primary goal in joining small groups? (Select all that apply)

Gaining knowledge

Growing in spirituality

Deepening your connection with God

Developing relationships with others

Having fun/socializing

Other (please specify): _____

Q3. How much do you think small groups contribute to your spiritual journey?

(1 = very little, 10 = very much)

Q4-1. How knowledgeable do you feel about The Priesthood of All Believers?

(0= very little, 10 = very much)

Q4-2. How knowledgeable do you feel about Quakerism?

(0= very little, 10 = very much)

Q4-3. How knowledgeable do you feel about Family Systems Theory?

(0= very little, 10 = very much)

Q5. How comfortable are you discussing these topics in a group setting?

(1= very little, 10 = very much)

Q6. How would you rate your current relationship with God?

(1 = very distant, 10 = very close)

Q7. How important is spiritual disciplines (such as prayer) for your relationship with God?

(1= very little, 10 = very much)

Q8. In total, how many minutes per week do you spend engaging in personal spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, Bible reading) on your own, not with others or in groups?

(0 minutes, 1-10 minutes, 10-20 minutes, 20-30 minutes, 30-40 minutes, 40-50 minutes, over 50 minutes)

Q9. How long have you been attending this congregation?

(1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, over 15 years)

Q10. How would you rate the depth and quality of your relationships with fellow church members?

(1 = superficial, 10 = deep and meaningful)

Q11. What does fellowship in a Christian community mean to you?

Q12. What specific areas of your faith or life do you hope to grow in during this program?

APPENDIX B

POST-PROJECT SURVEY

POST-PROJECT SURVEY

Q1. How satisfied are you with your overall spiritual growth and progress during the program?

(0 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied)

Q2. Can you share a specific moment during the program that stood out to you? What made it significant?

Q3-1. How knowledgeable do you feel about The Priesthood of All Believers?

(0= very little, 10 = very much)

Q3-2. How knowledgeable do you feel about Quakerism?

(0= very little, 10 = very much)

Q3-3. How knowledgeable do you feel about Family Systems Theory?

(0= very little, 10 = very much)

Q4. Do you feel more comfortable discussing these topics after participating in the program? (1 = Less Comfortable, 5 = Same, 10 = More Comfortable)

Q5. How would you rate your relationship with God now compared to the beginning of the program? (1 = more distant, 5 = same, 10 = closer)

Q6. How important is spiritual disciplines (such as prayer) for your relationship with God?

(1= very little, 10 = very much)

Q7-1. Has your time spent engaging in spiritual disciplines increased compared to before the program? (Yes / No)

Q7-2. In total, how many minutes per week do you spend engaging in personal spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, Bible reading) on your own, not with others or in groups?
(0 minutes, 1-10 minutes, 10-20 minutes, 20-30 minutes, 30-40 minutes, 40-50 minutes, over 50 minutes)

Q8. How did writing prayers weekly and sharing them during the sessions impact you?

Q9. Did you form closer relationships with any of your fellow participants? If so, please describe how.

Q10. How much has the depth and quality of your relationships with fellow church members changed after participating in the program?
(1 = no change, 10 = significantly deeper and more meaningful)

Q11. After participating in the program, how much do you think small groups help in developing a connection with God and others?

(0 = very little, 10 = very much)

Q12-1. Would you recommend this type of small group experience to others? (Yes / No)

Q12-2. Could you please share why you would or would not recommend it?

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE BOOKLET

Growing TOGETHER

3

A Listening Heart in Quaker Worship

"Through silence, Quakers claimed, God could be best encountered and heard. This was the medium of approach to God, and the medium for experience of God. … the use of silence ran throughout the devotional and practical aspects of church life."

[Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 38.]

> A class meeting is a small group that is primarily focused on transformation and not information, where people learn how to interpret their entire lives through the lens of the gospel, build a vocabulary for giving voice to their experience of God, and grow in faith in Christ.
>
> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 7.

1 **How is your life with God this week?**

2 **Is there any area in which you are struggling and need prayer?**

Lecture Note

A Listening Heart in Quaker Worship

I. The Beginning of Quakerism

1. 17th Century England: A Time of Political and Religious Turmoil
   - o The Great _____ War (1640-1649): Conflict between Royalists and Parliamentarians.
   - o Oliver Cromwell's Rule (1649-1660): Establishment of the Commonwealth of England; strict _____ governance.
   - o The Restoration of the Monarchy (1660-1674): Under _____, Puritans faced persecution, prompting many to seek religious freedom in North America.

* *Puritans* were a group of Protestants who sought to purify the Church of England. They emphasized biblical authority, predestination, diligence in work, and a pious lifestyle, while rejecting extravagant living as sinful.

2. The Emergence of Quakerism (The Religious Society of _____)
   - o The early Quakers were shaped by both Puritan influences and opposition to certain Puritan beliefs.
   - o Core beliefs and practices:
     - Simple living (e.g., plain dress, restrained consumption).
     - Shops closed on Wednesdays and Sundays for worship.

- Rejection of church _____, emphasizing spiritual _____.
- Opposition to predestination.
- Belief that God speaks _____ to believers, without intermediaries.
- Focus on the Second Coming and the end times.
- Commitment to _____ and nonviolence.

II. Four Core Traits of Early Quakers

1. Inward Encounter with God
   - o _____ Fox, founder of the Quaker movement: "Christ has come to teach his people himself."
   - o Fox challenged people: "You will say, Christ saith this and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say?"
   - o Belief in the Inner Light—the direct presence of God within each person.
   - o _____ in worship was a means of experiencing God's presence.

2. Spiritual _____
   - o Rooted in the belief that God speaks to all people directly.
   - o Based on the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)—no need for priests as intermediaries.
   - o Advocated for social justice, including abolition of slavery before it became a broader social issue.

3. Understanding of Rituals and Sacraments
   - o Traditional sacraments were seen as _____ symbols, while Quakers emphasized living a sacramental life.
   - o George Fox rejected external religious forms:

     "I was commanded to bring people off from all the world's fellowship, praying, and singing, which stood in forms without power… from all their images, crosses, sprinkling of infants, holy days, and vain traditions…"

o No separation between _____ and secular—
God's presence could be experienced anywhere.

4. Peace and Pacifism

o Rejected violence, refused military service, and disobeyed war-related laws.

o The _____ Testimony (1660):
Quakers presented a statement to King Charles II:
"Our principle is… to seek peace, to follow after righteousness, and to do that which tends to the good of all… We utterly deny all outward wars and strife with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever."

III. A Listening Heart in Worship

1. Quakers emphasized direct experience of God's _____ in worship.

2. Meetings were held in _____, but this was an active rather than passive waiting on God.

3. _____ was not the goal, but a means to seek divine revelation.

4. _____ Ministry:
   - o While silence was central, any member—regardless of gender or status—could speak when led by God.
   - o No formal clergy; spiritual authority was shared equally.

5. Worship rejected structured sermons, _____ (like baptism and communion), and hierarchical leadership.

IV. Evangelical, Conservative, and Liberal Branches

1. Over time, Quakerism developed into different branches, influenced by theological and social factors.

2. These branches vary in their approach to scripture, tradition, and worship practices.

Aspect	_____ Quakerism	_____ Quakerism	_____ Quakerism
Theological Beliefs	Traditional Christian beliefs, Trinity	Resists theological changes, experiential focus	Embraces a wide range of beliefs, experiential focus
Authority	Bible-centered, greater authority than feelings	Bible-centered, direct encounter with God	Experience-centered, primary over the Bible
Salvation	Through faith in Jesus Christ	Emphasis on transformation, mutual accountability	Rarely mentions sin and salvation, “original blessings”
Worship Style	Programmed, clergy-led sermons and hymns	Unprogrammed, silent worship, vocal ministry	Unprogrammed, silent worship, emphasis on silence
Mission Engagement	Actively engaged in spreading faith through missions	Focus on connections within the meeting, mutual support	Emphasis on inclusivity, openness to new ideas

V. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Quakerism

1. John Wesley emphasized four sources of _____:
   - o Scripture – The primary authority.
   - o _____ – The historical witness of the Church.
   - o Reason – Rational reflection on faith.
   - o Experience – Personal encounter with God.
2. Quakerism strongly aligns with experience as a primary means of knowing God, but also engages with scripture, reason, and tradition.

Aspect	Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Methodism)	Quakerism
Primary Authority	_____ is the ultimate authority, revealing God's self-revelation and plan for salvation.	Personal experience and the Inner Light are prioritized over Scripture.
Role of Scripture	The primary source of divine revelation and the foundation for doctrine and faith.	Important but not the sole authority; direct revelation from God is equally valid.
Tradition	Valued as an active process of theological reflection, but must be evaluated against Scripture.	Rejected as an institutional authority; emphasizes a return to early Christian simplicity.
Reason	A gift from God that aids in interpreting Scripture, though limited by human sinfulness.	Downplayed; spiritual discernment through silence and communal reflection is prioritized.
Experience	Confirms the truth of Scripture and offers new insights into God's Word.	The core of faith—the direct, personal experience of God is central to belief and practice.
View on Sacraments	Baptism and Communion as means of grace.	Rejects outward sacraments; all of life is sacramental.

Quaker O/X Quiz

1 **Quakers believe that every person has direct access to God without the need for clergy. (O , X)**

2 **The official name for Quakers is “The Silent Worshippers.” (O , X)**

3 **Quaker worship is typically centered around long sermons given by a pastor. (O , X)**

4 **Quakers have historically been strong advocates for peace and social justice. (O , X)**

5 **Quaker meetings always take place in large cathedrals with elaborate decorations. (O , X)**

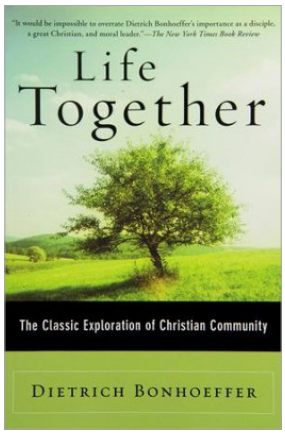
6 **Early Quakers were often persecuted for their beliefs. (O , X)**

7 **Quakers believe that the Bible is the only source of divine revelation. (O , X)**

8 **Many Quakers refuse to take oaths, believing that they should always speak truthfully. (O , X)**

9 **All Quaker worship services are completely silent from beginning to end. (O , X)**

10 **Quakers played a significant role in the abolition of slavery. (O , X)**



Life Together (1939) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a classic Christian book on the nature of Christian community. Written while he was leading an underground seminary during Nazi Germany, the book explores how believers should live in fellowship, centered on Christ. Bonhoeffer emphasizes gratitude for community, the importance of daily spiritual practices (prayer, Scripture reading, confession), and selfless service. He warns against idealizing Christian community, urging believers to embrace both solitude and togetherness. The book is a powerful reflection on authentic discipleship, humility, and the cost of true Christian fellowship.

> Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.
>
> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 97-98.

STOP!

Please do NOT read the answer section below until you have completed the O/X quiz on page 9.

1. Quakers believe that every person has direct access to God without the need for clergy. (O)
2. The official name for Quakers is "The Silent Worshippers." (X) (Officially called the Religious Society of Friends.)
3. Quaker worship is typically centered around long sermons given by a pastor. (X) (Many Quakers practice silent worship, waiting for God's guidance.)
4. Quakers have historically been strong advocates for peace and social justice. (O)
5. Quaker meetings always take place in large cathedrals with elaborate decorations. (X) (Quaker meetinghouses are simple, reflecting their focus on inner spirituality.)
6. Early Quakers were often persecuted for their beliefs. (O)
7. Quakers believe that the Bible is the only source of divine revelation. (X) (They value the Bible but also emphasize the "Inner Light" as a way God speaks to individuals.)
8. Many Quakers refuse to take oaths, believing that they should always speak truthfully. (O)
9. All Quaker worship services are completely silent from beginning to end. (X) (Silence is important, but members may speak if they feel led by the Spirit.)
10. Quakers played a significant role in the abolition of slavery. (O)

Discussion and Reflection Questions

As we discuss:

Maintain confidentiality – What is shared in the group stays in the group.
Listen actively and respectfully – Avoid interrupting or dominating the conversation.
Be honest and open – Share authentically while being sensitive to others' perspectives.

1 **Think of a time when someone truly listened to you with deep attention. How did that experience make you feel, and what does it reveal about the power of silence and presence in relationships?**

2 **Have you ever sensed God's presence in an unexpected or quiet moment? What was that experience like, and how did it shape your faith?**

3 **Quakers emphasize that all of life is sacred, with no division between the spiritual and the ordinary. In what ways do you encounter God in your daily routines, work, or simple moments?**

4 **Quaker worship is centered on waiting in silence and listening for God's guidance, rather than relying on pre-planned sermons or clergy leadership. Have you ever been in a setting where you felt God was leading rather than a structured program? How did that experience affect you?**

GUIDELINES
for Practicing Centering Prayer

PRACTICE STEPS

1 **Begin with a Moment of Readiness**
- Close your eyes.
- Take a few deep breaths, gently releasing tension.
- Offer yourself to God with a simple prayer: *"Lord, I am here for You. Let me rest in Your presence."*

2 **Gently Introduce Your Sacred Word**
- Silently say the word in your heart as a way of letting go of distractions.
- The word is not a mantra to be repeated constantly but a gentle returning point when your mind wanders.

3 **Rest in God's Presence**
- Do not strive to achieve anything. Simply be with God.
- If thoughts, emotions, or distractions arise, do not resist or engage with them.
- Gently return to your sacred word as a reminder of your openness to God.

4 **Closing the Prayer**
- When the time is up, remain in silence for a moment before opening your eyes.
- Offer a prayer of gratitude: *"Thank You, Lord, for this time with You."*
- Gently return to your daily activities, carrying the peace of prayer with you.

* Referenced from the following website : www.contemplativeoutreach.org

Prayer for the Presence of God

Lord of all moments, in the quiet and the chaos, in the sacred and the ordinary, You are with us. Open our eyes to see You in the simple rhythms of our daily lives. Teach us to listen for Your voice in silence, in conversation, and in the hearts of those around us. May we walk in awareness of Your presence, finding holiness in the everyday. Go with us now, and let our lives reflect Your light. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.

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